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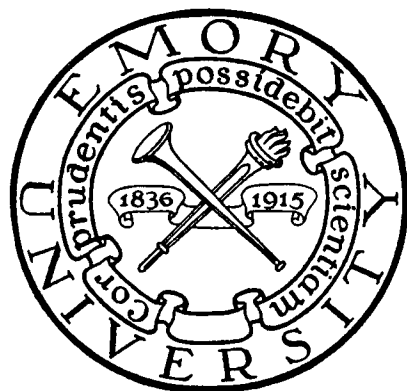
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A FAIR CRUSADER.



# A FAIR CRUSADER

*A Story of To-day.*

BY

WILLIAM WESTALL

AUTHOR OF

“LARRY LOHENGRIN,” “A QUEER RACE,” “RED RYVINGTON,” ETC.

LONDON

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# A FAIR CRUSADER.



## CHAPTER I.

### AT BAGOT'S HOTEL.

BAGOT'S HOTEL was the oldest and, as its proprietor thought, the most respectable house of entertainment at Whiteshingles ; so old and so respectable that there had been a time when it received only guests who brought their own carriages and whose hands were free from the taint of trade. But when stage coaches disappeared Bagot's democratised itself, and now, unless the house be full, any visitor with a decent coat on his back and money in his pocket may count on a cordial reception. Yet Bagot's visitors are generally of a higher class than those of rival establishments, partly because its charges are higher ; and its separateness is further marked by the survival of a few old customs. The landlord—at present Bagot III.—presides in person at the six o'clock dinner, the head-waiter is

called butler, and the sitting-rooms bear distinguished names, such as Wellington, Nelson, King William, Granby, Victoria.

The pleasantest of these rooms is undoubtedly the Nelson. It has two big bay windows, and, being on the west front and the first floor, commands a fine view of the sea. It is moreover solidly and substantially furnished in the early Victorian style, and wears a cosy comfortable look, essentially old-fashioned and English.

So, at least, thought George Brandon, as he leisurely breakfasted in the Nelson one fine May morning, some half score years ago.

"Heavy, perhaps, but very home-like," he soliloquised. "That huge mahogany sideboard—the heavy chairs, strong enough to carry a giant and last a century—the thick carpet—the capacious firegrate and coal fire—the pictures on the wall—the dear, old 'Hunters at Grass,' 'The Covert Hack,' 'Bolton Abbey in the Olden Time,'—all remind me of 'auld lang syne.' I am glad I came here. A good engraving that 'Hunters at Grass.' I'll buy a horse or two and do some hunting next season. I have half a mind to go to Bolton Abbey. How well I remember going there with my father when I was a small boy. It must be nearly twenty-five years since. How time flies! Ham and eggs, too! I had almost forgotten the taste of them, and capital ham it is. I'll have a bit more. The coffee is nothing to boast of, though. I'll have some tea."

Rings the bell, which is answered by a portly old fellow with silvery hair, a white waistcoat and a red face.

"I say, waiter——"

"I beg your pardon, sir, I'm the butler. By the name of Bagshaw, sir."

"Butler, certainly, if you prefer it; and now, when I think of it, you do look more like a butler than a waiter. You have age and weight, and a certain dignity of manner not observable in ordinary waiters. You are very different looking from my butler at Bombay, though;"—smiling—"I want you to bring me some tea. Your coffee, though not bad for English coffee, is not quite equal to what I have been having lately."

"You mean that it is not so good as French coffee. I have heard others make the same remark, sir. I think it would be worth Mr. Bagot's while to have a French cook. But he does not seem to see it. 'Those French cooks are troublesome chaps,' he said, the last time I suggested the idea to him; and I daresay they are. But we can give you a good cup of tea, sir; such as you never got in France nor yet anywhere else. I was glad to hear you say, sir—if you'll excuse me saying so—that you have a butler at your country seat. Bombay, sir, isn't it? Ah, yes, I think I have heard of it before. In the Midlands, I believe. Man and boy, I have been at Bagot's five-and-forty year, and there was a time, sir, when every sitting-room in the house was occupied by a county family. Why, we have had ten private carriages in the yard and twenty private horses in the stable at one time. Them was times, sir! Why, there was not a tradesman allowed in the house—none but lawyers, doctors, clergymen, officers and gentlemen. But now, Lord bless you, sir! They are nearly all tradesmen—Oldham spinners, Bolton mill owners, Bradford wool

staplers, Liverpool cotton brokers and such like. It was easy to see, when you came last night, sir, with your own servant, that you was somebody—a real gentleman. That was why we put you in the Nelson.”

“I am greatly obliged for the compliment,” said Brandon gravely. “Is the Nelson reserved for real gentlemen, then?”

“As far as we can, sir, as far as we can. But in the height of the season we are often obliged to let it to shop-keepers and such like. Whiteshingles is not what it used to be. Very few real gentry come here now. And no wonder! Railways and cheap trips are very fine things, I daresay, but they are not respectable, and gentlefolks don’t like ’em—leastways cheap trips. Why, sir, when the trippers come in their thousands at Whitsuntide and such like, the place fairly stinks of Oldham—it does indeed, sir, although we have sea air and main sewers. But I must fetch your tea. You shall have it in two minutes. There’s always some on the brew at this house. I hope you’ll excuse me, sir, but I’m getting an old fellow, and it is not often, now-a-days, that I have a chance of waiting on a real gentleman as has a country seat and travels with his own body-servant.”

The butler gone, Brandon indulged in a hearty laugh.

“How very English!” he muttered. “A typical Philistine, that old fellow. I bring my own servant and ask for the pleasantest sitting-room in the house, *ergo* I must be a gentleman. And my country seat in the Midlands. Bombay as a country seat is good. How Cotesworth would enjoy it!”

All the same, and despite his Philistinism and his ignorance of geography, the butler had a shrewd eye for quality.

Gentleman or not, George Brandon had good looks and an imposing presence. "Big all over," without being stout, he was fully six feet high, and the easy grace of his movements, the pose of his head, and the uprightness of his carriage, showed that he knew how to use his limbs, and suggested that he had been trained to arms. His face, except the streak of white on his forehead, was almost as brown as the mahogany sideboard, and a wavy, dark-brown beard fell low on his breast. His eyes, of violet blue, were large and rather deep set, and his nose was prominent and somewhat aquiline. His hair, cut short behind, was carefully arranged so as to conceal, as far as might be, a slight thinness on the top, and his well-fitting clothes and the general neatness of his "get-up" showed that he gave thought to the adornment of his person. But all was quiet and in good taste; he wore only one ornament—a massive gold watch-chain of Oriental workmanship, which hung in heavy folds on his waistcoat, and carried a jewelled locket, also, as might seem, of Oriental make.

As touching his age, George Brandon, though he looked no more than thirty, was past thirty-five.

The butler brought the tea almost as quickly as he had promised, and after lingering a few minutes and uttering a pathetic lament on the degeneracy of the age, which did not seem to interest Brandon much, he went his way, and George went on with his breakfast, reading the while the *Times of India*. As he poured out a second cup of tea, there came a knock at the door.

"Confound that old fellow," he muttered; "he is becoming a nuisance. Come in!"

On this the door opened, and there entered not the butler, but a young man in a tweed suit, his hat in one hand and a thick stick in the other.

"Uncle George!" he exclaimed, throwing his hat and stick on the sofa, "I am so glad to see you."

"And I am so glad to see you, Ned," said Brandon, rising from his chair and taking both the young fellow's hands in his. "Our first meeting since you were a little chap in petticoats! I was expecting you; but I should have known you from your likeness to your mother."

"And I should not have known you at all. But how on earth have you got to Whiteshingles, Uncle George? I was never so much surprised in my life as when I received your telegram last night."

"Last night! Why I sent it early in the afternoon."

"But I was away at a cricket match and did not get back to my lodgings until late, too late for the last train to Whiteshingles. So I took the first train this morning."

"You must be hungry then, Sit down and have some breakfast, and then I will tell you how I happen to be at Whiteshingles. But first of all, tell me how they all are at Fairmead."

"Very well, I believe. I had a line from my father the other day, and as he did not say anything was wrong, I presume all is right. They have been expecting you for a month past."

"I know; but I did not come straight on with the mails—loitered a few days about the Italian lakes, did the Riviera and the south of France; and when my travelling-companion, Lance Robinson, who is a Liverpool man,

proposed that we should travel by steamer from Bordeaux to Liverpool, I agreed to come with him. We got there on Friday night, and I thought of going straight to Fairmead, when I remembered that Dr. Thornley, who used to be in my old regiment—the Ninety-ninth Irregular Cavalry—had bought a practice at Whiteshingles, and that I had promised to look him up. So being in the neighbourhood, I decided to come on here and remain until Monday, and thinking you might possibly find time to run down from Manchester, telegraphed you on my arrival yesterday.”

“That was very kind of you, Uncle George. If you had not, I shouldn’t have been able to see you for ever so long. It is not often I get a holiday. How did you find your friend, Dr. Thornley?”

“I did not find him at all. He is at Bournemouth, where he went some three months ago. I fancy he found the air of Whiteshingles too keen for him. However, since I have the pleasure of seeing you I am glad I came. How long can you stay?”

“I must go back by the first train to-morrow morning.”

“So soon? Well, we must make a long day of it, and as it is so fine, I propose that we spend the most of it outside. And as I have nothing more to do here, I will go with you as far as Preston on my way south, if you will let me.”

“Let you! I shall only be too glad of your company, and we will talk about India, Uncle George. I take a great interest in India. I wanted to enter the army and go out there, but my father thought I should do better as a merchant, and so I sighed as a would-be soldier and obeyed as a son.”

"You don't like business, then? I am sorry for that."

"Oh, yes, I like it very well, and I think I have an aptitude for it. All the same I would rather be a soldier. What a splendid chain that is! Indian, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"I never saw links like these before;"—examining it—"how curiously they are wrought. And this jewelled locket is really a masterpiece. A present, I suppose?"

"I got it with the chain, which in the first instance I took."

"Took! Uncle George! Where from?"

"From a man I killed."

"From a man you killed!" exclaimed Ned Brandon, dropping the chain with a startled look. "I had no idea——"

"Yes, from a man I killed when I was younger than you—but in fair fight, and I narrowly escaped being killed myself. You see this scar;"—showing a mark on the side of his face, partly concealed by his whiskers—"well, I got that from the fellow I killed, and but for the chain of my helmet, which it half-cut through, the stroke would have been fatal."

"And you took this chain from him?"

"I did, 'and thereby hangs a tale.'"

"Tell it me, Uncle George. I am almost as fond of stories as I used to be when I was a small boy. And between ourselves, for I know the sentiment is not quite orthodox, I like stories of incident and adventure better than any others."

"Don't care about so much love, eh? I sympathise with

you, Ned. I like a good novel as much as ever I did ; but I prefer incident to sentiment. Love scenes I regard as detestable. I always skip them, and if there are too many I send the book to the devil. Well, I will tell you the story of the chain on one condition."

"Yes, uncle. What is it?"

"That you drop calling me 'uncle.' There is no great disparity in our ages. I am not much older than you—only some ten or twelve years."

"Only ten or twelve years!" thought Ned, who looked upon his uncle as rather an old fellow.

"I have never been 'uncled' before, and to tell the truth, I don't take very kindly to the 'handle,' honourable as it is. So just call me 'George,' that's a good fellow."

"Certainly, Un——George, if you wish it, though as I have always called you and thought of you as 'Uncle George,' I shall not be able to drop the 'handle,' as you call it, all at once. And now for the story."

"Wait till we are outside. But have you finished your breakfast? Quite sure?"

"Quite."

"Well, I'll ring for my boots"—suiting the action to the word—"and then we will go out."

"You can clear the table, Bagshaw, and will you please tell my servant to bring my boots? My—this gentleman, Mr. Edward Brandon, stays here as my guest. You can find him a bedroom, I suppose?"

"Certainly, Mr. Brandon. Number Eleven, the one next yours, is at liberty."

"All right, let him have that. Do you smoke, Ned?"

"Yes," said Ned, producing a cigarette-case, "I was just going to ask you if I might light up."

"Oh, those paper things! Won't you have a Manilla?" producing a cigar-case.

"No, thank you. Manillas are rather too strong for me. I smoke nothing stronger than cigarettes."

"And I smoke nothing stronger than Cavendish," said George, with a slight lifting of the eyebrows, as if he, too, thought the age was degenerating. "Ah, here is Ali Baba."

Ali Baba was a middle-sized, slightly-built man, with a swarthy face and large black eyes, the whites of them shot with lines of blood radiating from the iris, which gave him a peculiar and rather sanguinary look. His costume consisted of a pair of baggy white trousers, a loose-fitting coat and a turban. He brought his master's hat, boots and gloves.

Brandon sat down and took off his slippers, whereupon the man put on his boots for him and laced them.

"Have you brushed my clothes and put everything right?"

"Yes, sahib."

"And had your breakfast?"

"Yes, sahib."

"Then you can go out for a walk, if you like. I shall not want you again until evening."

"Yes, sahib."

## CHAPTER II.

## THE STORY OF THE CHAIN.

"I DARESAY you think I am lazy in letting Ali lace my boots," said Brandon to his nephew, as they wended their way towards the cliffs, "but it is so warm in India that one falls into lazy ways. Our servants do everything for us that we are not compelled to do for ourselves. I could lace my own boots, of course ; but as I have brought the fellow with me it's necessary to find him work. I brought him quite as much because he wanted to come as because I wanted him ; and he was very useful on the voyage—saved me a lot of trouble."

"Yes, he seems a handy sort of chap."

"You are right. He is a regular Jack-of-all-trades. He can cut your hair, shave you if you want shaving, mend your clothes, and, at a pinch, make you a new suit—I should be sorry to guarantee the fit, however—and cook you a dinner."

"A faultless servant."

"Not quite. Like most native servants, he is rather given to petty pilfering. If he spends a shilling for me, he will probably put down thirteen-pence."

"So are English servants. At any rate, they take tips from the butcher and baker, which comes to pretty much the same thing."

"So I have heard. But for the rest, Ali is very faithful and attached to me, I think. I once got him out of a rather awkward scrape at Bombay, and he protests that he will never leave me."

"Would die in your defence, I suppose, or kill some other body? He looks like it. Is he a Buddhist, or Parsee, or what?"

"Ali is really a follower of the Prophet, but not a very strait-laced one. Before he came to me, when he wanted a change, or got hardish-up, he would let himself be converted. He has been a Methodist—I believe they made him a Sunday school teacher—a member of the Church of England, and for one while he was an acolyte in the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Sydney."

"The rascal has travelled then? Rather a singular name, Ali Baba, isn't it? Reminds one of the 'Arabian Nights.'"

"I gave him that name—his own patronymic is so terribly unpronounceable—but there being a 'Baba' in it I thought it would simplify matters to call him Ali Baba. The idea pleased him, and he has almost forgotten that he was ever called anything else. Yes, he has travelled extensively. This is his second visit to England."

"I say, what an interesting book it would make if he could be persuaded to put down a truthful account of his experiences. But here we are on the cliffs. Let us sit down in this shady hollow—the turf is quite dry—and have the story of the chain."

"As you like. But I warn you beforehand that it will be rather a long one."

"So much the better. An interesting story can never be too long, and I am sure yours will be interesting."

"Don't say that, Ned, or you will make me nervous. The interest of a story depends as much on the manner of its telling as on the matter. A bad narrator may spoil

the best of stories. However, I will do my best, and if my tale is not interesting it is at least curious.

“As you may have heard, I went out to India the year before the Great Mutiny. We were under John Company at that time, and appointments were a matter of favour. But my father had good interest, and as soon as I had finished my course at Addiscombe, though I was hardly sixteen, I got a cornet’s commission in the Ninety-ninth Irregular Cavalry, and after a short stay at Calcutta, joined my regiment up country.

“Three months later came the whirlwind. The native troops at Meerut broke out into open rebellion, and after scenes of incredible horror — murder, rapine and incendiarism—the mutineers were allowed to march out of their cantonments and reach Delhi unmolested.

“The General in command had a large force of Europeans at his disposal, and by a single act of vigour might have nipped the revolt in the bud. But he was not equal to the occasion. A great part of the population joined the mutineers, every European on whom they could lay their hand was slain, and the city of Shah Jeehan was lost for a time—as some thought for ever—to the British power.

“The conflagration kindled at Meerut spread all over the country. Nearly every regiment of the Bengal army mutinied, and after massacring their officers and burning down their quarters, went off to join their comrades at Delhi, Cawnpore, Lucknow and elsewhere.

“The Ninety-ninth Irregulars were among the few that remained true to their salt. Our fellows were principally

Sikhs ; we had hardly any high caste men in the ranks ; and the entire regiment was warmly attached to Colonel Colvin, who had served with it twenty years and commanded it ten. A man of singular energy and tact, he knew every *sowar* by name ; and like Wellington's veterans of the Peninsular war they were ready to go anywhere and do anything.

"When news of the rising reached us, we knew that we should soon be wanted. Before the end of May we got the route. The Ninety-ninth had to join the force before Delhi, and twelve hours after receiving the order we were on the road.

"I was delighted. Youngster-like, I thought a great deal more about the chances of promotion which the mutiny might bring me than of the havoc it had already wrought, or the still greater horrors it might yet entail. I was, moreover, in high favour with the colonel ; he and my father were old friends, and I knew that it would be my own fault if I did not profit by the opportunity which fortune had thrown in my way.

"We were a long way from Delhi—quite three weeks' journey—and though we did not let the grass grow under our feet, Colvin was too old a soldier to use up horses and men at the beginning of a campaign, and the height of the hot season. We marched mostly through the night and rested during the day, generally in some shady grove, and always, of course, in the neighbourhood of water.

"Early one morning, when we were nearing the scene of action, we halted on the bank of a *nullah*, close to the grand trunk road ; and after we had drunk our coffee and watered and fed our horses, the colonel told me to take a party of

twenty-five men and a soubahdar-major, and reconnoitre the great highway, which we should henceforth have to travel.

"You will have to keep a sharp look-out, George," said Colvin. "The headman of the last village we passed through said there were several bodies of mutineers in the neighbourhood—making for Delhi, I suppose, to join those other rascals. I should dearly like to have a brush with some of them. But if you see any, don't engage. Take note of their strength, and, if possible, ascertain to what regiment they belong, and ride back and inform me at once."

"It was my first independent command, and proud of it I was, I can assure you. All the same, I did not like the idea of turning tail on a lot of Pandies. But obedience is a soldier's first duty, and I promised to give due heed to the colonel's instructions.

"We struck the road in less than an hour, and turned in the direction from Delhi. It was thither that any wandering parties of mutineers would be going, and I wanted to meet, not overtake them. It was, moreover, quite possible that we might encounter troops who were not mutineers, and we could only distinguish the one from the other by the facings of their uniforms.

"We went quietly, making as little noise as possible, the soubahdar-major and I well to the front, and keeping a sharp look-out all round. When the road was straight, we could see a long way ahead; but it was not straight everywhere.

"After riding perhaps five or six miles, and just as I was thinking we had gone far enough, we came to an abrupt

bend, which we had hardly turned when we saw, in the near distance, and coming towards us, a body of cavalry—as I judged, half-a-squadron—about eighty men.

“Were they friends or enemies?”

“Another minute, and I knew. I recognised their facings. They were those of a regiment which had mutinied, and the rascals were now doubtless on their way to Delhi.

“What should I do? Obey orders and turn back? was the next question. To turn back would expose us to great danger. Our horses were not fresh, we were eight or nine miles from the main body, and if those fellows overtook us we should be at their mercy. It is not easy to fight and run away at the same time. The boldest course was the safest, and though we were outnumbered by nearly four to one, my men were full of fight, and I had no misgiving as to the result.

“I gave the orders to close up and charge.

“The Irregulars answered with a ringing ‘Shabash—hurrah!’ The sabres flashed in the sun, then a wild gallop of a few hundred yards and we were at it tooth and nail.

“I don’t know how long the tussle lasted—five minutes perhaps. I rolled one fellow over, horse and all. Then two more came at me. The first I cut down, and almost at the same instant the other fetched me the lick on the head I was telling you about.

“It hurt, but did not stun me, and after exchanging a few passes, I gave him the point, full in the throat, and he fell from his horse, a dead man. After this the mutineers, who

had been getting decidedly the worst of it, turned and fled. I had some difficulty in preventing my men from riding after them. But pursuit, in the circumstances, would have been highly imprudent. We were already far enough from the main body, and for anything I knew, the troopers we had encountered might be merely the advanced guard of a much larger force.

"As we rode back, I took another squint at the *sowar* I had killed, and who had so nearly killed me. He was a big fellow, quite as tall as myself, and a good deal heavier. Round his neck was a gold chain, which looked like loot, and dismounting from my horse I took it from him."

"The chain you are now wearing, was it not?"

"Yes, and when I opened the locket and saw that it contained the portrait of a European woman, I knew I was right. He had stolen it, and almost certainly murdered the owner."

"Did you ever find out to whom it belonged?"

"Of course. I should have no story to tell, else. A brush with mutineers at that time was too common an incident to be worth talking about. I shall come to that presently.

"I returned to the regiment with some misgiving as to the reception I might meet with. Two of my fellows were killed, and five or six wounded, and the only positive result I had obtained was the number of the regiment to which the mutineers belonged. But when I made my report the colonel seemed quite satisfied. He did not see how I could have acted differently; and so far from finding fault,

he was good enough to say that I had shown both pluck and presence of mind.

“Nothing further of moment occurred, except a chase after a detachment of rebel cavalry, whom we failed to overtake. A week later we reached Delhi, and took ground near the Cachmeer Gate. We had plenty of hard work during the siege, and were several times engaged, but the lion’s share of the fighting fell, naturally, to the infantry and artillery.

“After the fall of the city in September, a force was organised for the purpose of clearing an extensive district, some sixty miles from Delhi, of a large body of rebels under the command of a rajah, who had joined his forces to theirs and laid the country under contribution. The command of this column was given to Colonel Colvin, and with him went the Ninety-ninth. The enemy was said to number six or seven thousand, and there seemed to be every prospect of a fight in the open on a larger scale than any I had yet witnessed.

“We moved out of Delhi about two thousand strong and were joined on the road by three squadrons of native cavalry and a regiment of Ghoorkas. Our great fear was that the Pandies would make a bolt of it, and disperse before we could come up with them.

“The first bit of work we had was capturing a fort. Though built of mud—or rather, because it was built of mud—it was a strong place, with a wide ditch, and might have been held for weeks ; but our fellows took it by assault, and encountered very little resistance. This augured ill for our hopes of an encounter. If the rebels made so poor a

fight of it behind the walls, how could we expect them to face us in the open?

"But we were agreeably disappointed. The day after the capture of the fort, we came on a large and picturesque village, near the edge of a wide plain, and learnt that the rajah's entire force was only a few miles away, and that he meant to oppose our further advance.

"Colvin decided to attack at once.

"No battle ground could have been better chosen, or more suitable for the operation of the arm to which I belonged, and when the entire force, infantry, artillery and horse—about three thousand men all told, each in his rank as on parade—took up the ground assigned to them, the sight was superb. The champing steeds, the picturesque uniforms and dark faces of our native auxiliaries, the long line of bayonets glittering in the sun, the neighing of the horses, the blue sky, the still bluer hills far away—those nearer brown and bare—the partly-wooded, partly-cultivated plain, the distant village indistinctly seen, the yellow land over which the troops so silently marched, soon to be crimsoned with their blood; no wonder that our pulses quickened and our hearts beat faster, and that while some among us enjoyed to the full the delight of battle and the 'pomp and circumstance of glorious war,' others thought sadly of the far-off land for which they might have to die, and the dear home they might never see again.

"I need not tell you all that happened that day, Ned. Though not a big battle, it was a glorious fight. The rebels were not easy to beat. For a full hour they refused to budge an inch. Their cavalry fought with great

resolution, rode out to meet us again and again, and we had several desperate encounters—horse to horse, man to man. Two *sowars* who had been unhorsed, actually came at me on foot, and I had to cut one down with my sword and finish the other with my revolver.

“The artillery did wonders. It was to them, after all, that the honours of the day were principally due. How the fellows dashed into fire! And you should have seen the feats of horsemanship they performed! During the pursuit, Wade’s troops, followed by some of the Irregulars, got into a ploughed field, fenced off from the road for which they were making by a broken mud wall nearly three feet high. There was nothing for it but either to jump this wall or go back. But to go back would have been to lose time, so at it they went, full gallop. The leaders took it beautifully, both together; next, the centre pair; after them, the wheelers; and, at last, with a sort of kick and a bump, over flew the gun, and alighted safely on the hard highroad. All who saw it gave the fine fellows a cheer. ‘Allah! Il Allah!’ shouted the Sikhs. ‘Truly, that is wonderful!’ And they were right.

“It was not long after this that a lot of us, riding in hot pursuit, got a long way in advance of our supports, and with more zeal than discretion charged a large body of the enemy’s infantry. As we went for them the fellows halted, formed in line, and gave us a volley point blank, which made us pause, and emptied several saddles. My horse, a little Arab stallion, hit in the throat with a bullet, fell heavily and rolled over me. If the ground had not been sandy, I should have been smashed all to bits. But I

was only stunned and rather badly bruised. When I came round the soubahdar-major was holding my head, and an officer whom I did not know standing by with a flask.

“‘Let me give you a drink, and you will soon be better,’ he said. ‘I don’t think you have any bones broken, but when I saw you dragged from under your horse I thought you were killed.’

“As the officer spoke he put the flask to my lips, and the drink did me so much good that I was able to sit up and thank him.

“‘Hallo!’ he exclaimed, ‘where did you get that chain?’

“‘You know it?’ I said, after I had told him. ‘I have worn it ever since I got it, in the hope that somebody might recognise it.’

“‘I know the chain well—very well,’ he answered, gravely; ‘and I knew the man to whom it belonged. I owe him more than life. I will tell you. But there is not time now. We shall meet again. My name is Somers—Lieutenant Somers—of Meredith’s Horse. Yours is——’

“‘Brandon, of the Ninety-ninth Irregulars.’

“‘Thanks! Good-bye for the present, I must ride on.’

“Shortly afterwards an ambulance came up, and I was carried to the field hospital.

“The same evening Somers paid me a visit, and told me to whom the chain had belonged, and how it had come into the hands of the trooper I had killed, But he did not tell me the whole story. He did not know it all himself, in fact, for the *denouement* was still pending. However, I

heard it all later on, and I think I had better tell it you consecutively and in proper order.

"Somers, as I have said, was—had been, rather—a subaltern in the Native Cavalry. One of his brother-officers was Captain Foster. They were close friends, called each other and were known in the regiment as Tom and Jack. Tom, I must tell you, was poor; he had little more than his pay. Jack, on the other hand, was a man of fortune, and quite independent of his profession. A short time before the outbreak of the mutiny these two were stationed at Meerut, and there made the acquaintance of Colonel Waters and his family. There were several daughters I believe; all very young, except the eldest, who was about nineteen and very good-looking. This is her portrait;"—opening the locket.

"No mistake about that," said Ned, looking at the likeness. "Soft brown eyes, dark hair, a sweet face and a good colour. Yes, that young woman must have been very lovely."

"Well, both Jack and Tom were deeply smitten. But Tom kept his love to himself, at any rate from the parents and his friend, and Jack became the favoured suitor. The father was affable, the mother all smiles; for Captain Foster had three thousand a year. And when he proposed, Miss Waters accepted—with some little hesitation, ascribed by Jack to maiden coyness and an excess of modesty—and he thought himself the happiest of men.

"The engagement had hardly been made, however, when the regiment was ordered to shift its quarters to a place about a hundred miles from Meerut, and the lovers were

forced to part, but not, as was hoped, for long, and if all had gone well they would have been married in a few months. But all did not go well.

“The night before the departure of his daughter’s sweetheart, Colonel Waters gave a ball, at which all the former’s European brother-officers were, of course, present, and equally, of course, Jack danced with Lillian Waters rather oftener than strict etiquette would have allowed. But he could not keep her altogether to himself, and in the course of the evening she had several other partners, Somers among the rest. Once, after she had danced with Tom, the two disappeared, and Jack, thinking they had perhaps gone into the garden, went in search of them in order to claim Lillian’s hand for the next waltz.

“For some time he sought in vain, and was returning to the ballroom, which he was beginning to think they had never quitted, when he heard his lady love on the other side of a huge magnolia bush, whispering his name. She was saying that she did not love him, that she had been forced by her father and mother to accept Jack because he was rich, that she had never loved anybody but Tom, and neither could nor would love anybody else. And then her voice died away in a murmur, and there were sounds of weeping and kisses.

“What Foster thought, I don’t know. I can only tell you what he did. At the first opportunity he took Lillian aside, let her know what he had heard, and told her sternly that she was free—that the engagement was broken off from that moment. As for Somers, he would have a few words with him when the ball was over.

"On this, Miss Waters, terribly agitated and almost fainting, said that Tom was less in fault than herself, that never before that night had a word of love passed between them. It was she who had proposed the walk in the garden, and if she had not—— She alone was to blame, she could not think what she had been doing ; and she entreated Jack to say nothing of what had passed—above all, to her father and mother, and she would try to love him as he deserved, and make him a true wife, indeed she would.

"To this, however, Jack would in no wise consent. He could not, he said, bring himself to marry a girl whom he had just heard confess her love for another. And yet he pitied her, and, as the sequel proved, still loved her. He understood all now. Her father was a martinet, her mother a match-maker, and together they had coerced Lillian into accepting him. She stood in great awe of her parents, and when Jack insisted on terminating the engagement she fell into an agony of fear, and begged so tenderly for a respite that he promised to keep the matter quiet for a while longer—going so far as to say that he would take all the blame of the rupture upon himself. Her parents should never know what he had overheard in the garden.

"And then they parted, never, as it turned out, to meet more.

"Shortly afterwards the mutiny broke out. The colonel of Foster's regiment, like many another veteran in the Company's service, was firmly convinced that, whatever others might do, his Sepoys at least would be true to their salt, but to make assurance doubly sure he got them to swear that they would never turn against their officers.

"A few days later a squadron of rebel horse, on their way to Delhi, rode into the lines and called on the regiment, which was just assembling for parade, to join them. The colonel ordered his men to charge the mutineers. The men refused, and though they were so far true to their oaths as not to molest their officers, they refused to defend them.

"So the mutineers, being now masters of the situation, began a general massacre of the Europeans, and of all the natives who refused to join them.

"Only two officers succeeded in getting away—Jack and Tom; the former mounted, the latter on foot. They made for a *serai*, or small fort, some three miles from the cantonment, garrisoned by a company of Sikhs and a few Europeans. But as a detachment of the rebel cavalry followed them in hot pursuit, the chances against their escape were very great. Had Jack been alone he could have gained the *serai* without difficulty, for his horse was fresh and fast. But he refused to leave Tom.

"At first they rode double, but finding this would not do, Tom dismounted, and holding on by Jack's stirrup-leather, ran by his side. They had a fair start, and it was just possible that they might reach the fort before their pursuers overtook them. But though Tom was swift of foot he could not run as fast as a horse can gallop, and when they were within half-a-mile of their destination it became evident that unless one was left to his fate neither could be saved.

"'You go on, Jack,' said Tom. 'A fellow cannot live for ever, and I shall die a soldier's death.'

"Jack dismounted,

“ ‘Get up,’ he said ; ‘if you don’t I will let Wildfire go, and then it will be all up with both of us. Get up, I say. Do as you are told.’

“The stronger will prevailed. Tom did as he was told.

“ ‘I know all,’ were Jack’s last words. ‘Be good to her, Tom. Write to my agent in Calcutta.’ And with that he gave Wildfire a stroke with the flat of his sabre and turned to face the rebels, who were now close upon him.

“All this was seen by the people in the fort. They saw the mutineers come up and fall upon Jack ; saw him shoot two fellows down with a revolver and run a third through with his sword. Then, fighting to the last, he was cut down by a big *sowar*, who, as he lay on the ground, rifled his pockets and was seen to take something from his neck.”

“The *sowar* was the mutineer you afterwards killed ?” asked Ned.

“Yes, the rascal got his deserts.”

“And he took from Jack the chain you took from him, and are now wearing ?”

“Yes, that is the story of the chain.”

“And a very curious one. But you spoke of a *denouement*. What was it ?”

“When Tom wrote to Jack’s agent at Calcutta, he learned that his friend had left him twenty thousand pounds, and being able to make settlements he found no difficulty in obtaining the consent of Colonel and Mrs. Waters to his marriage with their daughter.”

“And so they were married ?”

“And so they were married.”

"And lived happily ever afterwards, I suppose?"

"That I cannot tell you. But as I believe they are settled in England, I may possibly find out. I have an idea that they are living near London. Oh, there is one thing I forgot to mention. By the terms of Captain Foster's will, all his personal effects in India became the property of Lieutenant Somers, who was good enough to make me a present of the chain and locket, which otherwise I could not, of course, have retained."

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## CHAPTER III

### SISTER EVELYN.

"WHAT do you think of it all, George?" asked Ned, as uncle and nephew rose to resume their walk.

"As how, Ned?"

"What do you think of the conduct of Miss Waters, for instance?"

"Well, I was not surprised, when I came to know her, that Foster and Somers should have fallen in love with her. What I fail to understand is how she could prefer Tom to Jack. Though I never knew him, I am sure, from all I heard, that Jack was the better man in every way. But there is no accounting for women's vagaries in affairs of the heart—nor men's either, for that matter."

"Yes, Jack must have been the better man. A right noble fellow! Was such an act of self-devotion ever heard of before? Sacrificing his life in order that his rival might marry his sweetheart. I could not have done it. Could you, George?"

"I don't think I could ; but as I never was in love, I am perhaps not in a position to say what I should be capable of if I were."

"Come, now, that won't wash," laughed Ned. "Do you really mean to say, uncle—I beg pardon, George—do you really mean to say that you were never spoons on a girl? Why, I am only twenty-three, and I have been spoons on several."

"You young reprobate ! Why, yes, I believe I was once 'spoons,' as you call it ; the object of my spooning being a pretty girl whose acquaintance I made on the steamer in which I went out to Calcutta. I was very bad for a few weeks. The mutiny cured me of that folly, and it has never been repeated. The love I speak of is such as that which Jack Foster felt for Lillian Waters, and I have not yet seen the woman for whom I would sacrifice my liberty, much less my life. Fancy being tied to the same woman all your life ; perhaps becoming the father of a family, having two or three girls to marry, and as many boys to set up in life ! Married bliss is all very well for those who like it ; but for my part I prefer single blessedness."

"You have made up your mind not to marry, then?"

"I don't think I ever put it to myself in that way. In fact, I have thought very little about it. Say, rather, I have neither desire nor intention to marry, and when a man gets past thirty without falling in love, he has a right to look upon himself as pretty safe, I think."

"How one may be mistaken ! Do you know, my mother used to think that you stayed so long in India and wrote so seldom, because you were soured by disappointment—that

somebody had jilted you, or perhaps some girl you loved had died?"

"Nothing so serious as that, Ned. I am just as heart-whole as when I left Addiscombe nearly a score of years ago."

"But why did you leave the service, and never come home all that long time, and write so seldom?"

"I left the service because I was a fool; I did not come home because I left the service; and I wrote so seldom because I did not come home, and for other reasons which it is not necessary to mention. When you don't see your people for so long a time, correspondence cannot help languishing. There is nothing to keep it alive."

"I cannot fancy you being a fool," said the young fellow, with a laugh. "You certainly don't look like one."

"Thank you, very much. I was, though. At any rate, I acted foolishly. I mean in leaving the army. I saw a good deal of service during the mutiny, and got my step. If Colvin had remained, there would have been no trouble; but they made him a general, and then there arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph. To speak plainly, our new colonel was a brute. I did not get on with him at all; and when, through his influence, a fellow who had never set a squadron in the field was promoted over my head, I let my temper get the better of my judgment, and sent in my papers. I had a chance of withdrawing them, but I was too proud. I was also too proud to come home and begin life afresh in England. For a long time I did not even write, for I knew all my friends would think I had done wrong, and I was in no mood either to make explanations or put

up with reproaches. After that I took service with the Rajah of Mizlipatam—re-organised his army—and might have done very well if I had not incurred the enmity of the Resident, who insisted on my dismissal. He wanted everybody to bow and scrape to him ; but I never stooped to flatter any man—much less a fellow like Peters—and never will. The Rajah treated me handsomely—gave me a lac of rupees and a handful of diamonds. But I did not feel as if I had made my fortune, and being determined not to come home till I did, I joined a mercantile firm at Bombay—Cotesworth, Campbell and Co., now Cotesworth, Campbell and Brandon ; of which, as you know, I am still a member.”

“So you have made your fortune, or you would not have come home ? We heard you had been very successful.”

“Well, we have not done badly, by any means. We made money in cotton, and strange to say, we have kept it.”

“Why should you say then that you acted foolishly ? I think you have acted very wisely. You are far better off than you would have been if you had remained in the army. You are rich, and that, after all, is the main point.”

“I am not so sure about that ; and though I have as much money as I want, and more than I need, I do not count myself rich, as riches are reckoned now-a-days. Besides, money is not all. I like soldiering, Ned, above everything else. Even now I cannot pass a squadron on the march or see a regiment on parade without longing for my old life, and with a bitter sense of regret that I ever left it. If I had remained in the army, I should have been a colonel, perhaps a general, by this time. I would give—

willingly give—twenty thousand pounds this moment to be at the head of a regiment.”

“With such sentiments, uncle—I beg pardon, George—with such sentiments, I wonder you did not re enter the service, instead of going into trade.”

“I should have had to begin again at the bottom of the ladder, and that I could not brook—even if they would have had me back on any terms. For the Company has been abolished, and commissions are no longer to be got by favour or bought for money. No, as the tree falls so must it lie. I shall never soldier again—more’s the pity. Let us talk about something else. I have not asked you about Mary—your Aunt Minton, I mean—is she well?”

“As I know nothing to the contrary, I presume she is. But I go home so seldom now—things are so different from what they used to be — that unless something extraordinary occurs I hear very little family news, and we never did see much of the Mintons.”

“Poor Mary! I fear she drew a bad number in the matrimonial lottery. I don’t think I have had a letter from her for years. Minton has still that weakness, I suppose?”

“Yes; it is a great pity. Nobody can be nicer than Uncle Minton when he is all right.”

“And he is often all wrong, I am afraid.”

“I really don’t know. But I should think it very likely.”

“Poor Mary! I must look her up. How changed we shall find each other! When I left home I was a stripling of sixteen, she a little girl of seven or eight, and now——Hallo! What’s that? A brass band! Is military music

on a Sunday morning the order of the day at White-shingles?"

"It would seem so. Still, I never heard. Ah! there's singing too. I tell you what it is—the New Crusaders must be holding a meeting? and a great nuisance they are! There, don't you see them near the Marine Terrace?"

"Oh, those people? We have heard a good deal about the New Crusaders at Bombay. I should like to see what they are like. Let us go to them."

"By all means, if you wish it," said Ned, rather amused at the idea of anybody wanting to know what the New Crusaders were like.

The meeting was being held on a piece of open ground between the houses and the sea-shore. In the middle of a ring, formed by a group of onlookers and the brass band, stood the Captain-Crusader, a little active-looking fellow, wearing a laced cap and a red tunic. Near him were three or four young women in poke bonnets and drab dresses, the latter marked in front with the sign of the cross and the letters "N.C."

As Brandon and his nephew came up, the little man gave out a hymn, which was sung by himself, the young women, and several others who seemed to belong to the party. Then the captain, who jumped about like a dancing-master, clapped his hands, and the band struck up a lively tune, which, as Brandon observed, would have done very well for a march. Then another hymn, rattled off like a hunting chorus.

After this the captain announced that Brother Charnley, who had lately joined the Crusaders, would say a few words

in season ; whereupon, a rough-looking fellow stepped into the ring, and with uncouth gestures, and in rugged language, yet very earnest withal, delivered his testimony. Only a few weeks past, he said, he would at that hour have been going into the country to get "a sly pint." Then he was known as "Drunken Tom." Now he was "Happy Tom." Then his home was wretched, his wife miserable, his children starving, for he spent nearly all his wage in strong drink. But now he gave it all to his wife—to the last penny—the wage, not the strong drink. She was another woman, he another man ; he had a happy home, his children were decently clad and well fed, and went regularly to school. All this had come of joining the New Crusaders, and with God's blessing he meant to remain a New Crusader all his life long. To him followed his brother Dick, who said he had been induced to join the Crusaders by the wondrous change which conversion had wrought in Tom, and he exhorted all sinners and ne'er-do-weels, all who were in doubt, suffering or tribulation, to follow their example. For himself, until he joined the Crusaders, he never knew what true happiness meant.

"Perhaps," said the captain, with marked deference of manner, after another very lively hymn, "Sister Evelyn will now say a few words."

On this there stepped from the group of poke bonnets a young woman whom Brandon had not previously noticed, but once he set eyes on her he could not take them away. Despite the homeliness of her garb, her appearance was singularly graceful and prepossessing. She was tall and shapely, and her hands, innocent of gloves, were white and

well formed. The face of this young woman was pale and worn, as if some great sorrow had passed with its burning ploughshare over her soul ; her eyes, which had unusually long lashes, were large, in colour almost golden and wonderfully expressive ; her mouth was tender and sweet. The poke bonnet hardly allowed her hair to be seen, but her beautifully arched eyebrows were almost black, and though her features as a whole were too irregular to be pronounced perfect, her head was as shapely as the Medicean Venus. Sister Evelyn might have sat as the model for a Maria Dolorosa. At the captain's call she came forward with quiet dignity, and folding her hands bent her head in silent prayer.

Then she looked round and began to speak, at first with some hesitation but afterwards with great fluency and earnestness, so completely securing the attention of her hearers, yet more by the sympathy of her manner than the weight of her words, that even a number of rough men at the edge of the crowd, who had come to jeer, ceased their brawling and remained to listen.

"We Crusaders," she said, after making a few preliminary remarks, "are accused of fanaticism, coarseness, vulgarity, and I know not what besides. We are not respectable, we do not worship according to rule. We have no hierarchy, we do not set up an order of priests and deacons, we have neither creeds nor catechisms, and our ministers and officers are common people. Ah, my friends, I rejoice that these things are said of us ; for they were said of our Master and His disciples. They did not worship according to rule ; they too were accused of fanaticism, they too were despised

by Scribes and Pharisees, and held of small account by the rich and great. And they were common people—carpenters, fishermen, tent-makers and the like, for Christ came to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance, and He sought His proselytes among the poor and lowly. The rich young man who had great possessions went sorrowful away.

“Those humble, devout men, who went about with Him preaching the Gospel, and were derided and persecuted by the great of their day, are now held in high honour ; Rome has canonised them, and their sayings are being quoted this day in thousands of pulpits throughout the land. But if some God-fearing fisherman from Whiteshingles were to ask leave to preach in the great church of St. Paul or the great Abbey of Westminster, do you think they would let him ? Oh, no ! Not even if he were to speak with the voice of an angel. It would not be according to rule. And do you think the rich would admit him to their houses ? Oh, no ! It would not be respectable.

“I admit it ; we are not respectable. We don't want to be. When we are, our usefulness will be gone. We seek not our recruits among the fortunate of this world, but among the great army of miserales, among the homeless and churchless ; among waifs, strays, reprobates and cast-aways ; among all who are distressed in mind, body or estate, for the greater the sinner the greater the need of salvation. All these we invite to join our crusade, and we offer them, in the name of our Divine Captain, not wealth, nor place, nor power, but the content which repentance alone can give, and the peace which passeth understanding.

And I hold, dear friends—the Scriptures being my warrant,—I hold that there is more hope for poor castaways who, like the Son of Man, know not where to lay their heads, than for the rich, whose lives are either wasted in frivolous amusements or devoted to ambition, and whose hearts are often harder than their own gold.

“Some people will tell you that poverty and wretchedness are caused by bad trade and dearth of employment. Believe them not, dear friends; poverty and wretchedness spring from the selfishness of the few and the vices of the many. If we could only make the rich more pitiful and the poor more God-fearing, what a happy world it would be! A foretaste of bliss, the antechamber to Heaven! For remember this: that so surely as smoke rises and rain falls, do sin and selfishness bring suffering and death. Therefore in fighting against sin we are fighting against human wretchedness, and though some of you may not approve of our methods, you cannot but sympathise with our aims. Our methods are vulgar, people say. And why not? We appeal to the vulgar. We want to reach those who, unless we attract their attention, refuse to listen; to enrol in the Army of the Cross those who frequent neither chapel nor church, and to give new hope to the vast multitude, whose lives are wretchedness, and whose deaths are despair.”

“That will do, Sister Evelyn,” interposed the little man, in an undertone. “Very good; very good, indeed. But rather above their heads, and not enough of the Gospel. With a bit more practice you will do first-rate. FIRE A VOLLEY!”

"Confound the fellow," growled Brandon, who had got so near them that he heard what passed. "Confound the fellow, why did he not let her go on? She preached rank Communism, but it is the best sermon I have heard this long time, for all that."

"*Cette femme est bien belle, n'est-ce-pas?*" said Ned.

"*Oui. Elle est aussi une belle parleuse. Regardez sa figure, comme elle est fine et spirituelle, c'est la figure d'une Vierge de Raphael.*"

Sister Evelyn, who was quite within earshot, turned sharply round, and the shadow of a smile flitted over her Madonna-like face.

"Mind what you say," whispered Brandon to his nephew. "She understands French."

Just then one of the poke bonnets came round with a plate. Ned contributed a threepenny bit, Brandon two sovereigns. Sister Evelyn, who was standing by, gave a start of surprise, and rewarded him with a look eloquent of gratitude.

The collection over, the captain announced that the Crusaders were going to hold a service in their own room, inviting all who felt so disposed to accompany them, whereupon they formed in procession, the brass band playing a measure both loud and lively, and marched off.

As the crowd were dispersing, Brandon caught sight of his servant.

"Hallo, Ali Baba! What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Listening to the hymns, and the band. This seems a very nice religion, sahib. Plenty of music and fine clothes.

And that Mem Sahib who spoke so nicely, she is quite a *houri*."

"What do you know about Mem sahibs? Where are you going, you rascal?"

"To the meeting. The sahib in the red shirt asked all to go who felt disposed, and I feel disposed. It is such a very nice religion."

"Is Ali going to join the Crusaders, do you think?" asked Ned, when the man was gone.

"I should not be surprised if he did. He is quite an amateur in religions, as I told you."

"It would be a fine thing for them to catch a live Mahommedan, with a black face and a red fez. They would show him all over the country. What do you think of them?"

"The Crusaders?"

"Yes."

"They seem very much in earnest, and I daresay mean well. Indeed, it is only their evident sincerity and the spirit of self-sacrifice by which they are animated, that prevents the whole thing from being a veritable farce. However, I do not see that there is anything more absurd in a procession of New Crusaders than in such processions as are continually taking place in Roman Catholic and other heathen countries."

"You look upon Roman Catholics as heathens, then?"

"What are they else? Heathens with a veneer of Christianity, and your Anglican Ritualists are very little better. At any rate, though these New Crusaders believe in miracles, they do not profess to perform them. I

wonder if their aims are correct, described by Sister Evelyn. She is a refined and educated woman. How did she come to join them, I wonder?"

"Fanaticism, I suppose."

"I am not sure about that. Besides, to call her a fanatic explains nothing—only suggests another question: How did she become a fanatic? There is a history behind that woman, Ned. What can it be?"

"I have no idea," answered the young fellow, indifferently. "There are some queer people among the Crusaders. Anyhow, she has a beautiful face of her own. Do you know I thought I saw a resemblance——?"

"Ah! Did that also strike you?"—opening the locket.

"How strange! Yes, there is a slight resemblance. It is only in externals though; the shape of the face, the colour of the eyes and hair. But the expression is altogether different. There is something—how would you describe it?—nobler, more spiritual——"

"Yes," said Brandon, thoughtfully. "Sister Evelyn's face is that of a saint, the other that of a commonplace and rather frivolous woman—the average lady of society, in fact. The resemblance, as you say, is in externals only—just a chance coincidence. I have never seen—— However, let us go and have some *tiffin*. This sea air is appetising. It does me good. I think I shall stay here a day or two longer."

"I shall not have the pleasure of your company in the morning, then?"

"You will not lose much. In any case, we should part at Preston, you know."

## CHAPTER IV.

## AT FAIRMEAD.

“You will be surprised to learn that I spent yesterday with Uncle George. He is staying at Whiteshingles — went there to see an old Indian friend, whom, however, he did not find at home. I received a telegram from him on Saturday night and joined him on Sunday morning. He has a black servant whom he calls Ali Baba. Though rumour generally exaggerates, I think Uncle George is quite as well off as we have heard, and a confirmed bachelor. At any rate, he talks about having made his fortune—says he has as much money as he wants and more than he needs, and thinks marriage a bore. How much he is worth I have no idea ; but there was a Bombay man at our place the other day who said that Cotesworth, Campbell and Brandon have no end of money, and that Brandon, being a bachelor, and spending less than the others, is the richest of the lot. Their paper is just A1. They can sell any amount of exchange without attaching bills of lading, and never accept against their purchases in Manchester. Their London agents have always funds in hand, and remit on receipt of invoice. Meyer would give his ears to get their business ; but it would not have been good form to enter on the subject with Uncle George at our first meeting. I shall mention it to him later on, though he is so easy and good-natured that I anticipate no difficulty, and so I have told Meyer.

“You will not forget that our articles of co-partnership have to be signed, and the second five thousand paid on July first.

“Uncle George will be with you in the course of the week. He meant to start this morning, but at the last moment changed his mind and said he would stay a little longer at Whiteshingles. I have no idea why, for it is both dull and rowdy. The trippers have quite vulgarised the place.”

The letter from which the foregoing is an extract was signed “Edward Brandon,” and addressed to “Peter Brandon, Esq., The Cottage, Fairmead, near London.”

Peter was his father’s eldest son and George’s senior by some twenty years. This disparity of age had prevented the brothers from seeing much of each other in their younger days, and in after years circumstances arose which rendered their relations the reverse of fraternal. When George quitted the army, Peter wrote him a letter full of reproaches, a letter to which the younger brother gave an answer that not only closed the correspondence, but left behind it bitter memories. With the death of their father a new cause of estrangement came into operation. The old man bequeathed the bulk of his fortune to Peter, and very little indeed to George, a proceeding which the latter, rightly or wrongly, ascribed to his brother’s machinations, and plainly told him so. For a long time after this they took not the slightest notice of each other ; but George, though hot-tempered, was not the sort of man who nurses his wrath, and on being informed that Peter had become a widower, he sent him a kindly and sympathetic letter, which concluded with a suggestion that they should let bygones be bygones, and remember only that they were of the same blood. The elder brother, who had no objection to a

renewal of friendly relations with his prosperous kinsman, and whose heart was softened by his wife's death, accepted the proposal with effusion, and they thenceforward wrote each other an occasional letter, though at long and irregular intervals. Peter's deficiencies as a correspondent were, however, more than atoned for by his children, who wrote often and at considerable length to their Uncle George, an attention which he acknowledged by occasional replies and frequent presents.

And so it came to pass that when George announced his intention of coming home, he received a pressing invitation to make Fairmead his headquarters.

In the meanwhile, however, a momentous change had come over the fortunes of the Fairmead family. Peter took to wife a Frenchwoman less than half his age, who in the first Mrs. Brandon's time had been their daughter's governess, a step which caused his children so much dissatisfaction, that in their interest as well as his own, he found it expedient to let them leave the paternal roof. His elder son, Peter II., who was studying for the bar, went to live in chambers. Edward entered a Manchester shipping-house with a view of ultimately becoming a partner therein, and Katherine and Cordelia, though they paid their father an occasional visit, resided for the most part with a maternal aunt, who, deeply resenting her brother-in-laws's second marriage, had invited them to make her house their home.

Most of this was known to George, and what he did not know he guessed; but knowing also that the subject must needs be a somewhat painful one to Edward, he had pur-

posely refrained from alluding to it during their interview at Whiteshingles.

Peter read his son's missive as he smoked his matutinal pipe in the breakfast-room in The Cottage, a few minutes before his departure for town. He was a middle-aged man, with keen grey eyes, a black and white beard, grizzly hair, and a hard, expressionless face, full of wrinkles and furrows.

"A letter from Ned," he said, tossing it to his wife, who was toying with her two-year old boy. "George has turned up at last. He will be here in the course of the week."

"I am glad your brother is coming, but I am sorry Edward has been the first to see him," answered Mrs. Brandon, with a look of annoyance.

"Why!"

Mrs. Brandon glanced at her boy.

"I know what is in your mind," her husband went on. "You are afraid Ned may become his uncle's favourite, to the prejudice of that little chap."

"Is it not a mother's duty to think of the interests of her child?"

"Undoubtedly. But don't you think your fears are just a little premature, or, rather, I should say, misdirected? A man is never sure of not marrying, and George is quite young enough to marry and have no end of children of his own. Don't count your chickens before they are hatched, my dear."

"But Edward seems to think that your brother is a confirmed bachelor."

“How can he tell? People thought me a confirmed widower, and I thought so myself until I was fascinated by your charms.”

Mrs. Brandon smiled. She liked a compliment, and was proud of her conquest of Peter.

“I have a strong impression, though, that your brother will not marry, and if he thinks of it we must try to prevent him.”

“With all my heart. But we must not forget, Rufine, that George Brandon has a will of his own, and when he sets his mind on a thing generally gets his own way.”

“So do I, and I have made up my mind that he shall not marry. How rich is your brother?”

“How much is he worth, you mean? That is more than I can tell; but judging from what I have heard, and putting two and two together, I should say at least a hundred thousand—perhaps two hundred thousand pounds.”

“*Ma foi!* Four millions of francs! What a fortune! Think you he has made a will?”

“That is also a question I am unable to answer; but I mean to find out when he comes.”

“And if he has not made a will, to whom would his money go in—in the event of his death?”

“If George should die intestate, his property being as I take it, all personalty, would go to the next-of-kin, and the next-of-kin are his sister and myself.”

“Mrs. Minton would get half, then. *Quelle horreur!* I thought it would all come to you. However, a hundred thousand would not be bad.”

“Not at all,” responded Peter, with a sarcastic laugh,

"only as George is thirty-five and I am fifty-five, my chance of getting it is, to say the least, rather remote."

"The young die sometimes," said the lady, reflectively, "and I do not consider you at all old, Peter, dear. You look younger and are much stronger than many a man of forty. And your brother must be practically an old man. He can have no liver worth mentioning, and he is sure not to live long."

"I daresay you are right. I may out-live George, after all. A man cannot live in a tropical climate twenty years without suffering in health."

"Of course he cannot. How fortunate we had baby called George! Your brother will perhaps make him his heir."

"Don't raise your expectations too high, Rufine. If the children get half amongst them we shall have every reason to be satisfied."

"I shall not be satisfied. I want them to have it all," glancing at her boy, and the emphasis she laid on the "them" left no doubt as to whom it applied. "That's a large sum Edward asks you for, and you have paid five thousand pounds for him already. Shall you be able to find it without inconvenience?"

"As I have undertaken to find it, I must, inconvenient or not. And the money will not be lost. Meyer and Falkner are solvent and prosperous. Ned will pay a fair rate of interest, and in time return the principal. Then, Meyer's acceptance of the chairmanship of the Cascabel Gold Mining Company will be worth a lot of money to me. His name alone is sufficient to float it."

"It is well, *mon ami*. All the same, ten thousand pounds is a large sum to give to Edward."

"It is not given, I tell you. It is only lent."

"We shall see. Money lent to set up a son in business is not often repaid, I fancy. However, I hope you will make as much by this Cascabel affair. Couldn't you utilise your brother in connection with some of these enterprises?"

"You are about the sharpest woman in business matters I ever met, Rufine, and that is saying a good deal," rejoined Mr. Brandon, admiringly. "If you were a man, and had served your articles, I would make you an active as well as a sleeping partner. Ah! ah! Certainly, my dear, I do mean to utilise George. His name would look well on a prospectus, and carry weight. The world will credit him with being worth at least a quarter of a million. I shall take care of that. But it is nearly nine o'clock, and if I am not off at once I shall have to hurry, and hurry is good neither for digestion nor temper. Will you go to the gate?"

"With much pleasure, Peter, dear. Here are your hat and gloves. Don't forget your bag. *Allons !*"

Whereupon husband and wife passed through the spacious hall, and descending a broad flight of steps into the garden, walked down an avenue bordered by gay flower beds and green grass plots, for the original cottage had long since disappeared and been replaced with a big house of Peter's own building. But though big it was not beautiful; there were too many unbroken surfaces, too many slabsided walls; the once cream-coloured bricks of which they were composed had been converted by rain and exposure into a dirty grey, and the general aspect of the mansion was cold and forbid-

ding. Yet, nothing could well be more charming than its position, for The Cottage stood on a gentle eminence, overlooking on the one side a well-wooded and richly-cultivated stretch of hill and dale, and on the other, a rich expanse of forest, in a nook of which nestled the red-roofed homesteads of Fairmead village and its ancient and ivy-mantled church.

Though within easy reach of London, Fairmead was too far off to be reckoned as a suburb, and had, happily, not yet become a happy hunting-ground for speculative builders. This was, however, no fault of Mr. Brandon's, for he had bought a large piece of land near the railway station, made roads, laid it out in building lots, and run up a house or two, not quite as big as his own but nearly as ugly—*pour encourager les autres*. Rumour even credited him with the intention of organising a company for exploitation of his purchase, and covering all the vacant spaces of the village with villas of the regulation type, so close together that everyone of the occupants would be under the eye of his neighbour.

In truth, Peter was a very energetic gentleman, yet not, as may be supposed, a professional promoter of companies. He was a limb of the law, and head of the firm of Brandon, Bully and Loot, well-known and eminently respectable solicitors in the Old Jewry, who worked hand-in-hand with an equally respectable firm of accountants and promoters in Cornhill, and received a considerable share of their gains. The senior partner was director of several companies, his firm acted as solicitors to a great many more, and they were fond of putting their friends in for "good things," which did not always turn out to their friends' advantage. But

even the sharpest of speculators are not infallible, and Peter himself was occasionally taken in.

As Mr. Brandon occupied so important a position in the city, it was only natural that he should be a big gun at Fairmead. He was the Chairman of the School Board, president of the Buttercup League—an association for the promotion of patriotism and piety by giving balls to tradespeople and badges to servant-maids—patron of several local charities; and public opinion set him down as being—next to the corn-chandler and baker—the richest man in Fairmead parish.

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## CHAPTER V.

### THE BROTHERS.

GEORGE BRANDON was so little of a church or chapel-goer that he hardly ever went to a place of worship—except on great occasions, as, for instance, when some of his friends were married, or when he had been induced to stand godfather for one of their children. It must, therefore, have been an unusually strong motive which, on the night after he parted with his nephew, drew him to the service at the Crusader's room in Whiteshingles. Curiosity, perhaps; but whatever may have been his object, the result of the experiment was the reverse of satisfactory. The room was small and ill-lighted, the congregation rough, and the worship rowdy. People stared at him as if they had never seen a man with a gold chain and a long beard before. The preacher shouted till he was nearly black in the face, and drew so vivid a picture of the horrors of hell that he

frightened a woman—who was removed screaming—into hysterics, and several of his hearers howled as if they were possessed.

The picturesqueness of the meeting on the beach was entirely wanting; the few female Crusaders present were as ugly as the night, and Sister Evelyn was nowhere to be seen.

So soon as he could, which was when the preacher sank exhausted into his seat and ordered his hearers to “fire a volley,” George made himself scarce.

“This is more than I can stand,” he muttered. “How any refined and educated woman can belong to such a crew is past my comprehension.”

Wending towards his hotel he met Happy Tom, rolling drunk.

“Poor devil!” was Brandon’s mental comment. “He has soon fallen from a state of grace. If they did some real good one might pardon their buffooneries. But if their most boasted successes are as ephemeral as this seems to be, these people are an unmitigated nuisance. Yet what better can be expected from a religion whose ministers are mountebanks, and appeal to the lowest of motives—fear of punishment? Yet—— Hallo!”

“Salaam, sahib!” exclaimed his servant, against whom, in his abstraction, George had nearly collided.

“You here, Ali! I am very glad. I want you to do something for me.”

“Yes, sahib.”

“The Crusaders are holding a meeting in their room. It won’t be over yet. Go and find out what has become of the Mem Sahib who was preaching on the beach yesterday,”

"Yes, sahib. Salaam!" and with that, Ali Baba glided swiftly away, and the next moment was lost in the gathering darkness.

An hour later he returned with the news that Sister Evelyn and Captain Bray and his wife had been unexpectedly ordered by the Crusader commander-in-chief to proceed forthwith to another part of the country, and had left White-shingles early in the day.

"Where for?"

"Nobody knew."

"This commander-in-chief is a very autocratic sort of gentleman, I think. However, it is no affair of mine. Pack up my things and get my kit together, Ali. We leave here for London by the twelve o'clock train to-morrow."

"Yes, sahib."

Brandon lighted a cigar and strode moodily to and fro before the sea-front of the hotel.

"I am sorry she has gone," he soliloquised. "That woman piques my curiosity. She has one of the most striking faces I ever saw. But it is not that. I am past caring about faces, but I would like to know who she is, and how she came to join this ranting crew. There must have been some pretty strong motive at work. Well, perhaps I shall come across her again. I am not likely to forget either her face or her name. The deuce take that rascally commander-in-chief! By all accounts, he is as great a despot as the General of the Jesuits himself. He knows all about her, of course. But it is not likely he would tell me—and why should I ask him? It is no affair of mine.

. . . How cold it is! And, by Jove, it is actually

beginning to rain. What a beastly climate! An awfully stupid place, this. I wish I had gone with Nephew Ned yesterday. I fancy I shall soon tire of England. Six months of it will be about enough."

And then the ludicrous side of the affair striking him, Brandon laughed softly to himself, for he was not without a sense of humour, and could be amused even at his own expense.

"I wonder what Cotesworth and the other fellows would say if they knew that I was cursing the climate and bothering my head about a woman already—before I had been at home a week," he mused. "And for anything I know, Sister Evelyn may be the wife of some ranting Crusader fellow, and have two or three squalling brats at home. Gad! I never thought of that before. Yes, I'll go to London to-morrow, and if there's a good train before noon I'll take it. I won't break my head over Bradshaw to-night, though. I should not be able to sleep."

But Bradshaw was consulted early next morning, and with such effect that George reached town in good time, put up at a caravanserai in the neighbourhood of Charing Cross, and dined at his club in St. James's Street, where, as he expected, he met two or three men whom he had known in Bombay. The following day he did some business in the city, called on several of his firm's correspondents, from one of whom, the head of a great finance house, he accepted an invitation to dine and sleep at his ~~villa~~ near Barnet.

The last person on whom George called in the city was his brother, from which it may be inferred that he was in no great hurry either to see Peter or go to Fairmead. In point

of fact, he almost regretted having agreed to make Fairmead his headquarters. The promise to do so had been lightly given at the time of the reconciliation, a time when the younger brother had no immediate intention of visiting England.

"There was never any great love lost between Peter and me," he reflected. "I don't think I shall take to him much, and perhaps the less we see of each other the longer our friendship is likely to last. It was not nice of him to marry again in the way he did, at his time of life—awfully selfish, and very unfair to those children. I am not sure, either, that I shall get on with his new wife. However, I have promised, and if I don't like Fairmead I can leave it—making it my headquarters does not imply staying there altogether."

So a few days after George's arrival in London, he called at the office in the Old Jewry and asked for Mr. Brandon. It was a palatial sort of office, with swinging, plate-glass doors, mahogany brass-railed counters, and a small army of smart-looking clerks. There was, moreover, "much movement," as a Frenchman would have said, and a good deal of bustle and fuss.

The great brass plate at the entrance contained nearly a dozen names, some being marked "in" others "out."

Brandon, Bully and Loot evidently did an immense business, and were much too wide-awake to hide their light under a bushel. The surest way of attracting clients, patients or customers is to let it be known, or cause it to be believed, that you have already more than you know what to do with. The battle of life now-a-days is to the

blatant — to those who blow most loudly their own trumpets.

George had not long to wait. The smart young man to whom he had given his card came back in two minutes, and with a deferential smile requested him to step into Mr. Brandon's room.

As George entered and the clerk closed the door, Peter rose from his chair and came forward to greet the bronzed and bearded man, whom it required an effort to believe was the same as the smooth-faced stripling he had last seen a score of years before.

"God bless you, George! How wonderfully like your father! But I don't think I should have known you."

Peter had so long habituated himself to hide his feelings that his face was no longer capable of expressing any; yet the tremour of his voice showed that he was deeply moved. So also was George. He forgot his distrust, and remembered only that they were brethern—so much moved, indeed, that he could hardly command his voice. Second only to his emotion was the shock caused by the change in Peter's appearance—a change altogether for the worse. He had left his brother a comely young fellow; he found him a grey-haired, leather-visaged, dim-eyed and more than middle-aged man. So far as looks went, time and the world had used Peter Brandon ill.

"We have been expecting you for weeks," said the elder brother, "and from what Ned wrote, we made certain you would be with us on Wednesday or Thursday. You must surely have found Whiteshingles very attractive. You will go home with me, of course?"

"If you would like——"

"Of course I would like. Rufine would never forgive me if I did not take you. You must make our house your home all the time you are in England. And I will give myself a holiday in honour of your arrival. I can be ready in an hour ; can you ?"

"I can. I will take a hansom to Charing Cross, tell my servant to pack up and come on to Fairmead by a later train, and return at once. Will that suit you ?"

"Exactly. Ned told us about your servant. Ali Baba, don't you call him ? By-the-bye, what do you think of Ned ?"

"Very well. A fine, pleasant-faced, young fellow ; fond of out-door sports, too, which I take to be a good sign. But we have not said anything about Mary. How is she, poor girl ?"

"I have not seen her for a long time—lost sight of her, in fact. I did all I could for her, but she refused to listen to advice, and her husband grossly insulted me," said Peter, coldly. "Since then we have not met, and I have no idea where they are. They shift about so much. If I were you I would not go near them. They will treat you as badly as they treated me."

"Oh, but I must see Mary. What advice did you give her that she refused to follow ?"

"I wanted her to leave that vagabond. I could have got her a judicial separation. I have not the least doubt I could."

"Judicial separation ! And it has really come to that ? On what grounds ?"

"Cruelty and desertion."

"I am very sorry. Poor Mary! What a bright little lassie she was when I went out. All this renders it the more necessary that I should see her. I might perhaps help her."

"I don't think you can, George—or anybody else, so long as she clings to that fellow."

"I shall try, Peter. Where are they; what is their address?"

"I really don't know. The last time I heard of them they were about to leave their lodgings in Regent's Square, but where they went I have no idea."

"Do you know anybody who has? For I am determined to find them, even if I have to advertise in the *Times* or apply to the police."

"They might possibly tell you at the office of the *Town's Twaddle*. It is in Fleet Street, near Chancery Lane."

"I will call there on my way to Charing Cross, and inquire. Harold Minton has betaken himself to journalism, then?"

"Yes, he has come to that," said the lawyer, contemptuously.

The journalists with whom he had come most in contact were obsequious touters for advertisements and reporters of obscure financial weeklies, ready to do a "par" for a consideration.

So soon as his brother was gone, Peter telegraphed to his wife, and sent one of his smart young men to buy a salmon and order it to be sent to Fairmead by the next train, packed in ice.

In the meanwhile, George was driving westward and keeping a sharp look-out for the office of the *Town's Twaddle*, where he had told the cabman to "pull up." But had they trusted solely to their eyes, and not made inquiry of a passing postman, they might have looked a long time, for it was at the top of a long alley, and as the outer door led also into a barber's shop, George at first imagined that the barber ran both concerns. But in this he was mistaken; the two establishments—as the youth in the doorway, which served as the editorial ante-room rather indignantly informed him—were quite distinct and independent.

The editor, a bluff, red-faced man, who was smoking a short-pipe, plying a big pair of scissors, and consulting at frequent intervals a huge tankard of stout, received his visitor with great affability, but when George stated his business he looked rather grave. It was against all rule, he said, to give a contributor's private address. Moreover, he could not oblige Mr. Brandon even if he would, for he really did not know where Minton was hanging out just then.

But when George pressed the point, mentioned that he was Minton's brother-in-law, and wanted to do him no harm, but good, it occurred to the editor that he expected to meet a man at the Gaiety that afternoon who knew where Minton lived, and if George would leave his address he would try to send him the information required.

George thanked the editor, and gave him his Fairmead address.

"You smoke?" he said, seeing the sort of man he had to deal with. "I have brought several boxes of Manilla

cheroots with me ; may I have the pleasure of sending you one or two ?”

“Thanks, awfully. You are very kind. Certainly. Cheroots are my favourite smoke. You may depend on getting that address to-morrow.”

George sent him three boxes.

“That fellow must be a regular nabob,” exclaimed the editor, as he opened the parcel. “Carriage paid, too ! I wish he was my brother-in-law. Minton is in luck.”

“Minton must have sunk very low to write for a little blackguard society paper like this,” muttered Brandon, as he glanced over a copy of the *Town's Twaddle* with which the editor had been good enough to present him.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### RUFINE.

GEORGE BRANDON, as we know, was by no means prepossessed in his sister-in-law's favour. He thought he should not like Mrs. Peter. But he had hardly set eyes on her when his opinions underwent a considerable change. She possessed a graceful figure, set off by a tasteful toilette, her eyes were black and her hair was raven, and though her cheeks were pale and her lips rather thin, and she had not the clearest of complexions, Rufine Brandon, *née* Souveran, was an undeniably fine woman. George did not wonder that she had fascinated his brother—why she had chosen to fascinate him was not quite so evident. She was, moreover, bright, lively and clever, and her slightly foreign accent, and

the occasional use of a French locution, added to her attractiveness.

She "cottoned" to George from the first, and they soon became good friends. She admired handsome men, and he was a handsome man; and he had an easy, nonchalant manner which greatly pleased her—perhaps because it so strikingly contrasted with the fidgetty, somewhat abrupt manner of her lord and master.

"You have no idea how you surprised me," she said, as they strolled in the garden after luncheon. "I think I was never so startled in my life. I thought Peter had brought the wrong man."

"What made you think that?"

"I had pictured you as a shrivelled up, prematurely old fellow, with a face like a crumpled piece of brown paper; always complaining about his liver; and behold you are——"

"What?"

"I must not tell,"—smiling; "it would make you vain. But I may tell you what I think. I think you must have met with some good fairy in India, who bestowed on you the gift of perpetual youth. You have lived twenty years without growing older. How have you managed it? I wish you would tell me the secret."

"Ask Peter if I have not grown older. He says he would not have known me."

"I will, when he has done talking to the gardener. Oh, I daresay you have changed—you were a boy when you went out; but it is a change for the better. You are not growing white like *mon pauvre mari*. But he is a good old man, and so much attached to you; you have no idea. He

was quite wild with excitement when he knew you were coming home. I have asked Katherine and Cordelia to come and stay with us. They will be delighted to see you. I was so sorry that my marriage caused them to go away. I know there was great disparity, and I had been their governess ; but if your brother had not been so sure that I should make his happiness, and I had not felt sure that I could not make him a good wife, I would have refused him once again, as I had refused him twice already. You see I am quite frank with you. You are of the family ; it is right I should be. I want you to be my friend. Do you think I did wrong ?”

“No, I don’t think *you* did wrong.”

“Ah ! but I see by your intonation—you lay stress on the *you*—that you think your brother did wrong ; that in marrying himself with me he made a mistake. Others also think the same ; they have said so. But divest yourself of prejudice, and consider for one little moment the facts, Monsieur George. It is true there is disparity of years ; but in France one thinks little of that, and, *ma foi*, the difference was not so great after all. I was no longer a young girl, and at fifty-two or three a man is not old. You will not consider yourself old when you are fifty-three. True, I was poor and nobody, he was rich and had a position ; but in England, where girls are so rarely dowered, that makes nothing. For the rest, I do not think the advantages were so very much on his side.

Here Mrs. Brandon drew herself up and smiled significantly, as much as to say that her youth and good looks were more than a set-off for Peter’s money and position.

George did not altogether like this rather commercial way of putting the matter, yet he could not deny that if Rufine had gained ease and an assured position, she had brought her husband a full equivalent.

"You will perhaps say," she went on, "or you would if you were not too much of a gentleman—you will perhaps say that I drove away the children of the first marriage. They gave it out that I did. It is not true. I wanted them to stay. They went of their own free will. People are always ready to believe ill of a stepmother. But they never say anything of the selfishness of big children. And they are selfish! oh, so selfish! If it suits them to go away, they go away, even though a father is left desolate and alone. But if the father marries himself again, and secures a companion for his old age, they resent it as a personal injury. If it be the mother that marries herself again, it is even worse. They call her hard names, and say she is an unnatural monster. It is very unjust. I tell you all this. I open my mind to you because you will hear things. They will talk to you, and I want you to know only the truth. But I think no more of it. The girls and I and the young men, we are good friends. Your brother, I think, he is content; and I am happy with him and my little boy. Ah, behold him! He is there with his nurse."

As she spoke, Mrs. Brandon ran to meet them, and uplifting the child, exhibited him triumphantly to George.

"See!" she exclaimed, "is he not a fine boy? We have called him after you. He is George. We have always wondered who he was like. I know now. He is like you."

Her eyes sparkled, and her face was radiant with delight;

the motherly love that that shone there made her quite beautiful. George looked more at her than at his little namesake.

"Whatever else she may be, she is a fond mother," was his mental comment, "and a fond mother cannot be a bad woman."

The liking he was beginning to entertain for his sister-in-law was fast deepening into respect.

"I confess I don't see the resemblance," he answered, taking his nephew in his arms, and tossing him in the air, to the child's great delight. He cooed vociferously, and pushed his small, white fist into George's big brown beard.

"About as unlike me as he can be, I should say. He is better-looking than I ever was. To have such a fine little chap as this might almost reconcile a man to matrimony—and even to being a father."

"Reconcile you to being a father! What an inveterate old bachelor you are, *mon beau frère*. But baby is really very like you; he has your eyes exactly. Don't you think so, Peter?" Her husband had just joined them. "Don't you think the two Georges—George I. and George II.—are as like as like?"

"Of course they are—as two peas," said the lawyer, his leathery face relaxing into a smile, "barring George's beard and his brown skin, and those will come in time, I suppose. True Brandons, both of them. Baby is the image of his uncle, and George is the image of his father. Hallo! Wheels! Who is coming, I wonder?"

"I expect it is my servant with my kit," put in George, as a cab appeared in sight.

And so it was—a cab laden with luggage, and Ali Baba seated on the box.

“Your native servant!” exclaimed Mrs. Brandon.” What a picturesque little man he is! Ned told us about him. Very clever, is he not? And I daresay very faithful?”

“Yes. Ali knows what he is about; and I think he is attached to me.”

George made a sign to the driver, the cab stopped, and Ali, descending from his perch, salaamed respectfully to the company. His master spoke a few words to him in Hindustani, whereupon Ali returned to his place, and the cab was driven up to the door.

“Doesn’t he know English?” asked Mrs. Brandon, who had more than an average share of curiosity, and did not take kindly to the idea of her brother-in-law and his servant conversing in a language which she could not understand.

“Very well; but we talk in Hindustani as often as in English, I think,” answered George, carelessly. “You will be able to guess shortly what I said just now.”

A few minutes later Ali appeared with a parcel, done up in white tissue paper, and a small packet folded in the same material.

George took the parcel, removed the covering, and displayed a magnificent Cashmere shawl which he handed to his sister-in-law.

“A little present I have brought you from India,” he said, “if you will do me the favour to accept it. Also this;”—undoing the packet.

“This,” was a box of ebony, inlaid with gold, and when

Mrs. Brandon looked therein she saw, reposing on a bed of finest cotton wool, a splendid pearl necklace.

"*Mais vous êtes bon,*" she murmured. "You are too good. Thanks, a thousand thanks. You must let me kiss you"—suited the action to the word. "This shawl, why it is fine enough for a queen! And this necklace, *ma foi*, it is really superb. Many a duchess has not such a necklace;"—putting it on.

"I am glad it pleases you. It becomes you admirably. Pearls always go well with a dark complexion. I got it from a native dealer at Colombo."

"You will spoil my wife, making her presents like that," said Peter, pleasantly. "I cannot afford to give her pearl necklaces and Cashmere shawls."

"You must look on the necklace as my wedding present, if it be not too late. I quite forgot to send one at the time you were married. I am very careless about such matters; and it is so difficult to know what to choose."

"You could not have chosen better, dear George. I dote on pearls, and I was simply dying for a Cashmere shawl."

"I am very glad; I have been more fortunate than I expected. I hope Katherine and Cordelia will be equally content. I will show you what I have brought for them when we go in."

The suspicion of a frown flitted across Rufine's face. It was an alloy to her satisfaction to know that George's generosity had not been confined exclusively to herself. But when the other presents were produced and she found that they were less valuable than her own, that she alone was the possessor of a pearl necklace, she felt almost happy

again ; for even better than receiving presents Rufine liked to play the first fiddle.

“Your brother is charming ; I have no other word for it—charming,” she repeated, when she and her husband had withdrawn to their own room. “He is a *beau garçon*. I never saw a handsomer man—and so generous !”

Peter, who was rather painfully conscious of being neither handsome nor generous, made no reply. It is not always gratifying to hear your wife sing another man’s praises, even though he be your own mother’s son.

“I was glad he said nothing about Mrs. Minton,” she continued after a short pause. “And he does not seem to have brought her anything. He must quite have forgotten her.”

“Not at all,” retorted Peter, and then he told her what had passed at the office.

“*Vingt cinq mille diables, mais tu est bête, mon pauvre mari, bête, je dis, bête. Tu as fait une grande sottise,*” burst out the wife of his bosom, who always, when excited, fell back on her native tongue, perhaps because it allowed her greater freedom of expression than is permissible to ladies in English.

“What do you mean ? What is the matter ?” growled Peter, who though he understood not a word of French, perceived that his wife was in a rage.

“Matter ! Don’t you see you have made a great blunder ; one of those blunders that are worse than a crime ? You are a clever lawyer, you can mount a company, you know business, you understand those matter-of-fact men in the city ; but in anything not of your *métier*, above all, when a

little *finesse*, is required then, my dear husband, you are—a baby.”

“What *do* you mean, Rufine? I have made no mistake. I merely told George how the Mintons have treated me.”

“Of course, you don’t see. But in trying to set him against them you have surely done the opposite. Your brother is a man of loyal and generous character, a man who is free with his money and sympathises with the weak. When he asked about Mary, and showed that he had still an affection for her, you should have showed affection for her also, helped him to find her out, and asked her and her husband to come here and meet him.”

“Asked them here! You forget how they have treated me.”

“What signifies that? The magnanimity of a forgiveness and the *éclat* of a reconciliation would have been just the thing to please George and make you master of the situation. As it is, he will go and tell your sister all you have said, and, *en revanche*, she will say all the unpleasant things she can think of, and set him quite against us. I know now why he said nothing about her.”

“That is a view of the matter which certainly did not occur to me. Yes, I am rather afraid I committed an oversight. How can the blunder be repaired?”

“Leave it to me. I think I see a way. Only you must back up all I say, and approve of everything I propose. Is it a thing agreed?”

“It is. I leave George in your hands entirely. I have quite enough to manage in the city without trying to

manage him. Except, of course, as to anything touching business and finance."

"Of course . . . He must be very rich ; quite as rich as we thought."

"Very likely, I should say. But what brings the subject into your mind just now ?"

"The profusion of his presents. Those Cashmere shawls—the girls' and mine—must have cost him a hundred and fifty guineas. I do not think they could be got for a hundred and fifty guineas in Regent Street. And that pearl necklace, what do you suppose it is worth ?"

"I don't know much about the value of such things. Perhaps a hundred pounds."

"More. I cannot, of course, tell what your brother may have given for it in Ceylon, but I am sure you could get nothing like it in London for two hundred pounds. Yes, George is very generous and very rich. Did you remark that diamond ring? My faith! is it not a beauty? And it is as Edward said—he has no intention of marrying anybody."

"Perhaps not. But you may take your affidavit that somebody will marry him. And I do not see that it matters so much whether he marries or not. So far from being the invalid we expected, George is stronger and looks younger than most men of his years. I fancy an actuary would tell you that his chances of life are quite as good as baby's."

"Oh, but it matters very much whether he marries or not, my dear Peter. See you not that marriage would take him away from us and stop all these beautiful presents? He is the traditional bachelor uncle, who plays the part of an earthly Providence to those he likes. But once let him

marry, and that will be all at an end. A wife would shut up his pockets with a key. And the unexpected sometimes happens. He might take a fever or get killed in a collision."

"Of course he might, or tumble downstairs and break his neck, or commit suicide, or kill somebody and get hanged. We are discussing probabilities, not possibilities. And when all is said, what can you do? You cannot hinder him from marrying."

"I will try, *mon ami*, I will try," said the lady, as she extinguished the candle. "Do not forget to find out whether he has made a testament, as you said."

"How my old man is stupid!" she thought in French, as she nearly always did. "If George had come home sooner I might have married him myself. I am sure he admires me. That pearl necklace is superb. I will wear it at the Buttercup ball next Thursday, and George—he shall go with me."

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## CHAPTER VII.

### MARY.

ON the next morning but one after his arrival at Fairmead, George received a letter from the editor of the *Town's Twaddle*. It gave him the Mintons' address. They were living in the neighbourhood of Fulham.

Mrs. Brandon saw him open and read it. She would have much liked to know whom the letter was from and what it contained.

"I shall go to town to-day," he said, in his usual serene

manner, "and may, perhaps, not be back until rather late. I may dine at my club."

"I am sorry for that. I was going to ask you to take me out for a drive. We have some very beautiful drives, and the weather is so fine."

"Another time I shall only be too glad. But to-day I have business in the city—and elsewhere."

Elsewhere! What business could he have elsewhere? she thought.

"Do you think you shall see your sister, soon?"

"Probably. Yes, I hope to see my sister, soon. I shall very likely see her to-day."

"Ah, then, you will perhaps kindly convey to her a message which I have been wishful to send for some time. But I could not; we did not know where they were living. Will you please give her my love and say we shall be so glad to see her and Mr. Minton at The Cottage. There was a little estrangement a short time ago. I am sure no one regretted the cause more than I did. But, I hope, now you are back, all that will be forgotten; that your sister and Mr. Minton will let bygones be bygones; and Peter is quite of my mind; are you not, Peter?"

"Certainly. We shall be very glad to see them, I am sure," said Peter, as amiably as he could, but with an involuntary grimace that reminded George of a small boy taking a black draught.

"I will tell Mary what you say," he answered, rather coldly. "But don't you think it would be better if you were to write to her?"

"Exactly what I am going to do," returned Mrs.

Brandon ; "and if you will kindly take charge of the letter I shall be greatly obliged."

When George had done his business in the city, which was no more important than calling at a bank and drawing some money, he hailed a hansom, and left the driver to find as best he could the remote and obscure street where the Mintons lived. And it was not found easily, for it lay in a locality seldom visited by a cab, and with which few city drivers are familiar ; a seedy street of small, jerry-built houses of that dead uniformity of design so dear to the British architectural mind, inhabited chiefly by clerks with small salaries and skilled workmen with good wages.

"Here you are, sir ! Bridge Street, Number Seventy-seven," said the cabman, after a two hours' spin interrupted by several "pulls-up" for inquiries.

"You had better wait. I do not think there is a cabstand anywhere near," said George, as he got out. He detested walking, and would rather have given five pounds than lose himself in the wilderness of sordid houses and vacant spaces through which he had just been driven.

"I don't think there is, sir," answered the man, drily. He was wondering what such a blooming swell could want in so unpromising a locality. A woman must have something to do with it, he thought, and when his fare rang the bell of Number Seventy-seven, he looked keenly at the door. What he saw when it opened was a slim "slavey," with a surprisingly clean face—for a slavey—and an unbedraggled dress.

"Is Mrs. Minton at home ?" asked George.

"Yes, sir," said the slavey, with awe. She had never

beheld such a portentous beard and so grand a gold chain before, poor girl.

"Can I see her?"

"Yes, sir; will you please step this way, sir; please sir?"

Then the door closed, and the cabman saw no more.

The girl showed the swell visitor into the front parlour without daring to ask his name. Though small, it was scrupulously clean and by no means ill-furnished.

"They are not so poor, after all," thought George, as he mentally took stock of the contents of the room. "That clock must have cost a pound or two, and the piano is worth at least twenty."

"My servant says you want to speak to me."

George turned sharply round, and found himself in the presence of a tall woman, with a pale and rather worn, yet comely face, a somewhat sarcastic smile, and bright blue eyes.

"Mrs. Minton?" he said, trying hard, but without success, to trace in her features some resemblance to the little girl he had left behind him so long ago.

"That is my name. What is yours?" she asked, tartly. The man seemed to be looking her through and through.

"Don't you know me, Mary?"

"Know you! Certainly not; I never saw you before. By what right do you call me Mary?"

"That of a brother."

"George! Dear old George!"

And the next moment her arms were round his neck, and she was looking lovingly into his eyes.

"Forgive me for not recognising you," she said, "but a

beard like this would disguise anybody. If your face had been as clean as I remember it, I am sure I should have known you. Did you know me?"

"Not a bit. You were a little girl in short frocks the last time I saw you."

"And now! But I fear I received you with some asperity. Do you know why?"—laughing.

"Well, you were rather abrupt. Because I hadn't given my name, I suppose."

"More than that. When Sally announced that 'a hawful swell' wanted to see me, I thought it was surely either the tax-gatherer or the rent-collector, and I have not five shillings in my possession. But come into the other room, and let us talk there. If smaller, it is cosier than this, and decidedly warmer, and as you have been so long in a warm climate, I daresay you are of a chilly disposition."

"This is our workroom," she continued, leading the way into the back parlour; "Harold's and mine; and, as you see, rather rough and tumble. Sit down in that armchair, and if you like you can smoke."

"How are you prospering, Mary?" asked George, as he acted on the hint.

"Brilliantly. Going from bad to worse as fast as we can, though of late, I am bound to say, there has been a temporary pause in the process. No use asking how you are prospering, my brother. It is evident in the ring on your finger and the chain on your waistcoat, in your well-fitting clothes and your portly person."

"You are the old Mary still," laughed George. "You were noted even as a child for your sharp sayings, and the

habit has not left you. But if you love me, don't say I am portly."

"Why? Don't you consider it a compliment?"

"A very left-handed one. Portliness implies fatness, and when a man gets fat he looks both old and absurd."

"Well, you look neither old nor absurd, George. \* You do not look your age by five years. You have the biggest beard I ever saw; and as I once heard a groom say about a horse, you are as handsome as paint, and I am quite proud of you. There now, will that please you?"

"I suppose it ought to do; but really you know——"

"You are not married, I hope?" interposed Mrs. Minton, abruptly, and with a look of alarm.

"No!"

"Nor engaged to be, nor in love!"

"I am neither engaged nor in love."

"So much the better. And if you should ever be bitten with a fancy for marrying, take my advice and Punch's: 'Don't.'"

"You have not drawn a prize in the matrimonial lottery, I fear, my poor Mary!"

"No, indeed, I have not. I have brought my eggs to a very queer market, I can tell you. 'Oh, when I think what I am, and what I used to was, I see I've thrown myself away without sufficient cause.' Just fancy! If I had not married I should have had four hundred a year clear, be able to live where I like, and have neither a family to support, nor a man to take care of."

"Minton has nothing, then?"

"He had once, but that went long since. And my

fortune would have gone, too, if it had not been fastened to me."

"Drink, I suppose?"

"Yes, George, drink is the cause of all our woes."

"Still, drink does not cost very much. It need not ruin a man."

"If you confine yourself to London gin and British brandy, perhaps not. But when Harold is on the 'loose,' as he calls it, he drinks nothing so common. At any rate, he did not once. He is obliged to take what he can get now. There was a time when he would have only the rarest vintages and the oldest cognac, ride the best horses money could buy, go to races, and live on the fat of the land. You may get through a good deal of money in that way, George. Oh! I have had some strange experiences. Once I came home after a short absence—we had a nice house then—and found everything gone. Harold wanted money, and had sold every stick of furniture we possessed. I did not see him for weeks after that."

"Why don't you leave him?"

"That is what everybody asks. But don't think worse of him than he is. He has lucid intervals—he is having one now—and when he is all right he is the best husband in the world. He worships the very ground I tread on. That is why I don't leave him. And I have taken him for better or worse, you know. Perhaps you will think me a fool, but I love Harold still, George, and I mean to keep to him 'till death us do part.' What would become of my poor boy if I should abandon him?"

"Poor Mary! Your devotion has been ill requited, and

will continue to be, I fear. But can nothing be done—to reform him, I mean?”

“We have tried everything; and to give him his due, so has he. He has signed the pledge over and over again. I think we have been to every hydropathic establishment in England, as well as to several on the continent. The last experiment was putting him in an inebriate asylum at his own request.”

“And that did not answer, either?”

“Not exactly. He had to go before a magistrate and make a declaration under the new Act, you know. I went with him, and he had got up the law so well, and explained it so clearly, that the magistrate could not believe that he was the drunkard—and actually thought it was me for whose admission he had to make out the order! However, the matter was arranged and the poor boy entered the asylum. For a while all went well. Harold’s conduct was most exemplary. The doctor, who was also proprietor of the establishment, flattered himself that he had effected a radical cure, and one fine day let Harold go to a cricket match and gave him a shilling for gate money. He contrived also to get two shillings from the doctor’s wife by saying that her husband had gone out without giving him any. Two hours later he returned—very tight; and when the doctor scolded, Harold knocked the poor man down, and then sat upon him—literally, I mean. That was the end of the inebriate asylum.”

“I should think so,” said George, laughing. “It is well you do not look altogether at the sorrowful side of your troubles, Mary.”

"If I did I should go mad. Do you know, if I had not been such a fool as to marry, I think I should have found life rather amusing. Oh, I could tell you lots of stories. The only thing left for Harold to try is a course of crusading. He has tried everything else!"

"A course of crusading?"

"Yes. You must have heard of the Crusading Army. They go about singing hymns to dance music, and praising God with brass bands. But I am told they do much good, and have reclaimed thousands of drunkards. They are all teetotallers, you know. I wish they would reclaim Harold."

"I saw something of the Crusaders at Whiteshingles," returned George, thoughtfully. "Their style of worship is certainly very striking, but I cannot say that I much admire their theology."

"Whiteshingles! What were you doing at Whiteshingles? And where are you staying now?"

"At Fairmead, with Peter."

"Ah! And Peter's wife? They make you very welcome, of course."

"Yes, they are very kind."

"Naturally. But if you had returned unsuccessful, and asked Peter to lend you a fiver or two, your reception would have been very different. You would not have found any superfluity of kindness in that quarter, I can tell you. What do you think of Rufine?"

"Oh, I like Rufine; she is lively and agreeable—has a good deal of what the French call *esprit*; a woman of more than average intelligence, I should say."

"I am not surprised you like her. She is a man's woman."

"Seeing she is Peter's wife, that is pretty obvious, I think."

"Yes, she has caught Peter. I mean that she is a man's woman generally. She lays herself out to please men. She always did, and she succeeds. Men like her, but women don't."

"That means you don't like her, Mary."

"Put it that way, if you please. I admit it. I don't like her. I don't think she is sincere, and I believe she cares for nobody but herself."

"Anyhow she seems to make Peter a good wife, and is a most affectionate mother. She is passionately fond of that child."

"That is maternal instinct. A tigress will die in defence of her whelps, but she would gobble you up all the same. As for Peter, she just twists him round her finger. He dare not call his soul his own, poor old man."

"Well, I don't know anything about that, I only speak of her as I find her. Who was she?"

"She was Mademoiselle Rufine Souveran before she became Mrs. Brandon. She says her father was a physician in the south of France, and she certainly knows a good deal about drugs and that, and can both write prescriptions and compound medicines. She cured Peter's sciatica. I think that was what won his heart; the *coup de grâce*, as it were. I expect the truth is that Souveran *père* kept a pharmacy, and the only degree he ever possessed is the one she gives him."

"If those are your sentiments I am not surprised you quarrelled," said George with an amused smile. "How is it that women always seem to think so much worse of each other than men think of them?"

"Probably because we know each other better. We are a cackling, jealous, mischief-making lot. I suppose you have found that out, and it's the reason you don't marry. You are wise. However, I will make you one concession about Peter's wife, as you appear to have such a liking for her. She is a very clever woman, who has seen a good deal of the world—and unless I am mistaken, something of the seamy side of life; she can be awfully nice—when she likes,—and is as deep as you and me put together. If she were single, I should say 'Beware,' but as she cannot well be married to two men at the same time, you are safe—for the present. But if anything should happen to Peter——"

"I am glad you think I am in no danger, Mary," returned George, drily. "But let me try to heal the breach. Rufine wants you to kiss and be friends, and sends all sorts of peaceful messages—also this note."

"'Let bygones be bygones, and pay them a visit,'" reading the letter. "What can be the meaning of it, I wonder? Anyhow, I am not going to be beaten in a contest of magnanimity by Mrs. Brandon. If Harold is agreeable—and he generally is when I bid him—we shall accept this invitation, and my sister-in-law and I will kiss and be friends—or, at any rate, pretend to be."

"That's right, Mary. I detest family differences. How did the trouble begin?"

"Well, Peter wanted me to apply for a divorce, which, by

telling a few untruths and appearing in court, might, I dare say, have been obtained. But as Harold had not deserted me—he was only missing—and as he had not ill-used me, in the legal sense of the term, and I did not want a divorce, and would not for the world appear in a court, even if he had done, I refused ; on which Peter waxed wroth and said cruel things, and Rufine wrote me a very unpleasant letter, and I gave it her pretty warm, and Harold, who does not care the least bit for anybody when he has had a glass or two—just when he is beginning, you know—went one day to Peter's office and called him a leather-faced old hypocrite, and advised him the next time he wanted to marry to look out for a wife who would let him call his soul his own, and finished up by saying that Peter was much more likely to be plaintiff in a divorce suit than he was to be a respondent."

"No wonder Peter was riled. I am surprised he is willing to let bygones be bygones. He is more forgiving than I gave him credit for. However, all's well that ends well. I hope when Harold comes he will——"

"Keep sober ! You need not think you hurt my feelings by alluding to his infirmity. It is that and nothing else. He cannot help it, poor boy. I think he will keep sober—for the present. He has been very good for some time, and is working hard at his new profession of literature. He has had to give the old one up entirely. He is really a very able physician ; but a doctor who drinks and, occasionally disappears for days together, is of no use whatever. He has lost several good appointments and half-a-dozen practices. Now, no one will employ him, and though he is clever with his pen, he finds literary work difficult to get ;

so he is forced to take whatever comes in his way, and does science gossip for that scurrilous little rag, the *Town's Treadle*."

"I am afraid you are not too well off, my poor Mary."

"No, indeed, I am not. Just now we are doing better. But it may not be for long. I am obliged to send the girls to a boarding school. I could not do with them here. The possibility of seeing their father—you understand. And when the school bills are paid there's not much left, and we have debts. Heigho! Life is very sad, after all, George, though I do try to make the best of it. I often wish it was over. What a consolation to think that every day brings us so much nearer to the end."

"Nonsense! Don't talk in that way. There are better times in store. Here is something I have brought you from India."

"A pair of bracelets and a brooch! How beautiful! And how good of you to think of me. Thank you, dear boy, thank you very much."

"And here is something else—giving her a sealed envelope—but you must not open it till I am gone."

"No, no! I shall open it now. Did you ever know a woman who could restrain her curiosity five minutes? I never did. Here goes!"—breaking the seal.

"Bank notes! One, two, three, four, five. Five fifties—two hundred and fifty—two hundred and fifty pounds! Why, I can pay off everything and—and—God bless you, dear old man"—kissing him—"You are too, too good. But do you really mean—can you afford——?"

"Of course I can. Take them and say no more about it

—and if you are ever in difficulties again be sure you let me know.”

“A ring! Harold, I do believe. Don’t say anything about these—thrusting the notes into her dress. He is all right now. But there is no telling how long—— Yes it is.

Here is my brother George, Harold. He has quite taken us by surprise. Just fancy! I had no idea, even, that he was in England.”

The brothers-in-law, looking at each other, and both a good deal surprised, shook hands. Minton had not expected to see George at all, much less to find him so imposing in presence and so youthful in appearance, and Harold, instead of the broken-down sot which George in his imagination had pictured him, looked a gentleman all over; well and quietly dressed—a flower in his button-hole, a cane in his gloved hand. True, his face was rather haggard, his eyes slightly bloodshot, and their under-lids swollen; but these might be due either to burning the midnight oil or an impaired digestion. Save perhaps the thinness of his legs and a slight trembling of the hands, there was nothing in his appearance to betray his besetting vice. His smooth skin, quick speech and lively gestures showed that Harold Minton was a man of ready apprehension and sanguine, impulsive character.

Mrs. Minton showed her husband the bracelets and the brooch, but said nothing about the money, and after he had admired the presents and thanked the donor, she mentioned Mrs. Brandon’s invitation.

“By all means let us go, if you would like, Mary. So far as I am concerned, I shall only be too glad to let bygones

be bygones, Peter tried to do me an ill turn, it is true. But I really behaved very badly, and I am much to blame.

. I say 'I,' yet it was not I. It was the other man."

"The other man! Who is the other man?" interrupted Brandon.

"He knows—he has heard?" interrogatively to his wife.

Mary made an affirmative gesture.

"Of course you have heard. Who that knows Mary has not? The very fact of your finding us here is enough. Besides, you are her brother, and it is only right you should know all . . . Yes, it was the other man that insulted Peter. He is always doing the most damnable things, that other fellow; an unredeemed villain who, instead of being cared for and cherished by the best woman in the world, ought to be hanged—no less. The other man is my other self. I am two men, George. You see now my true self—the man who wooed and won your sister, and is still as much in love with her as ever. The other is a hideous caricature—a ruffian—lost to all sense of decency and honour. The effect of drink, you will say. No, I am the least mischievous when I am the most stupefied. It is the craving—the terrible craving—and when that is on me, and I am just beginning, I seem to lose both conscience and personality, and become literally another being. Let those who never feel thus thank God. Yes, let them thank God."

Here, trembling with excitement, Harold paused as is for a reply, but as neither of his hearers made any, he continued—

"I tell you this, George Brandon, because I want you to know at the outset of our acquaintance that your sister's husband is not a mere brutalized sot, but a poor devil who goes wrong because he cannot keep straight. But I have been all right a long time now. How long have I been all right, Mary?"

"Thirteen weeks and three days."

"Thirteen weeks and three days?"—triumphantly—"I have worked, too, and earned more than fifty pounds, and brought it all home to Mary; have not I, Mary?"

"You have, dear boy," answered his wife, fondly, as she put her arm round his neck, "and if you persevere and keep firm you may perhaps keep all right to the end. And then who so happy as you and I? We could have the darling girls home, and leave this wretched street and hold up our heads in the world once more. Oh, Heaven! if it could only be!"

Mary's eyes were brimming with tears, her voice was broken with emotion, for though she encouraged her husband with brave words, George could see that she did not flatter herself with the vain hope that the demon that possessed him would ever be exorcised.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### MINTON'S MASTER.

THOUGH George went to the Buttercup ball, Mrs. Brandon could not prevail upon him to dance. It was too much exertion. He preferred whist, and passed nearly all the time in the card-room, showing thereby an insensibility to

her charms and an indifference to her society, which Rufine, though she did not allow them to influence her manner, resented in her mind ; for she had taken special pains with her toilette, and was conscious of being the best dressed, if not the best looking, woman at the ball. She had nevertheless the felicity of showing off George and herself in a promenade round the room, displaying her pearl necklace and talking largely about her brother-in-law's immense wealth to the dames and knights of the Buttercup League.

It would, however, have greatly detracted from her satisfaction, perhaps made her violently jealous, had she known that George was thinking very little indeed about her, and very much about his sister and Minton. He had been deeply moved by Mary's story, and he pitied her from his heart. Harold, too, he pitied. What could be done for them ? If money would be of any use—but it was just one of those cases in which money might do more harm than good. Mary had told him—while Harold was out of the room—that the possession of money was often her husband's sorest temptation ; an empty purse and the necessity for exertion his surest safeguard.

Mrs. Brandon gave the Mintons a warm welcome. She and Mary kissed and became seeming friends. Peter behaved as well as could be expected in the circumstances ; but he could not play a part so well as his wife. His manner showed that he had not quite forgotten, nor probably forgiven, being called a "leather-faced old hypocrite," and the other pleasant little things Harold had said to him the last time they met. It would perhaps have been

as well if Minton had made no reference to the incident, but he probably thought it might sooth his—Peter's—feelings to offer an apology.

“I am very sorry,” he said, “about what passed when I came to your office that time. I did not know what I was doing, and I withdraw unreservedly all that I said. It must have been very unpleasant for you ; but you will pardon me, I am sure.”

“Of course, or I should not have asked you here. Better say no more. It is not a very agreeable subject. Let us think no more about it.”

Peter's manner belied his words. Harold felt sure that he thought a great deal about it, and that in his heart his brother-in-law was as bitter against him as ever.

As for the sisters-in-law, they went about arm-in-arm, and to look at them you would have supposed they had been close friends all their lives long. On the other hand, Mary found it almost impossible to get a word in private with George. Whenever they were together there was always somebody to make a third ; occasionally Peter, but mostly his wife. Mary's attention was divided between her husband and her sister-in-law. She watched both like a cat watching a mouse, the one in her own interest, the other in that of her brother. The dinner was an anxious time for her, and when Harold refused wine and asked the butler for beer, she felt greatly relieved. So long as he kept to malt liquor he was safe, but if he tasted either champagne or brandy he would be in danger.

“You have been a very good boy,” she said, when they were alone. “I would not for the world anything should

happen—that you should break down here. It would be too awful.”

“I do not think you need fear, Mary; I don’t feel the least like it.”

“George would be so grieved, and it would be such a triumph for Rufine and Peter.”

“Yes, I daresay Peter would not be very sorry to see me break down. He has not forgiven me for that little affair, by a long way. But I do not think Rufine bears any malice. You may say what you like about her; but she is a deuced nice woman.”

“Of course. All you men swear by her. And she has really been very agreeable. I don’t think she likes us, though. She has only asked us to please George, and if she can set him against us you may be sure she will.”

“But why? And why should she be so anxious to please him?”

“So that she may get him under her thumb as she has got Peter. Because he has money, and she craves for admiration, and likes power. I have just a suspicion, too, that there may be another reason.”

“And that is——?”

“I believe she is beginning to like George—to like him very much.”

“Nonsense, Mary! You women are always thinking evil of each other.”

“That is what George said yesterday. All the same, I believe I am right. Watch her. She is nearly always looking at him under those drooping eyelids of hers. And

is there anything so very outrageous in the idea? Do you think she cares particularly for Peter?"

"Not a bit."

"She married him for his money. What marriage could be more incongruous? Consider the difference between him and Peter. Nobody could help being struck by the contrast, much less a woman like Rufine, who thinks so much of personal appearance, and has the hot blood of the South in her veins. And he has been so kind to her. That pearl necklace is enough to win any vain woman's heart. It was meant as a compliment to Peter's wife; she will regard it as a homage to her charms."

"Win a married woman's heart with a necklace! You are too cynical, Mary."

"I said a vain woman's heart; and Rufine has more than her share of vanity and less than her share of scruple."

"Pleasant for Peter! Suppose you are right, what will come of it?"

"Well, if she were single she would probably marry George, although he does care so little about women. As things are, however, I don't think that there is anything to fear. He is a gentleman, and would never think . . . And poor as is my opinion of Rufine, I cannot fancy her making open love to him. If not too good, she is, at least, too worldly-wise to compromise herself, and forfeit George's friendship at the same time, for that would be the result. All the same, I may be mistaken. Foreigners have their own ideas about these things. I advised George against marriage, and, as a rule, it is the greatest folly anybody can

commit ; but there are exceptions, and perhaps on the whole he better had marry, if only in self-defence."

"As a *pis aller*, you mean?"

"Exactly ; as a *pis aller*. Always provided, of course, the *pis aller* is of the right sort."

"Have you anybody in your eye?"

"I know nobody good enough for him. Women are such geese."

"I know one exception, though."

"Who? I should like to see her. She must be a *rara avis*, and no mistake."

"You, Mary, dear ; you are the best and wisest woman I know."

"I proved my wisdom by marrying you, I suppose ! I am the greatest goose of the lot, you foolish boy. But it is no use talking. There is a fate in these things. Let us hope that if George tries his luck he will draw a prize. There may conceivably be in existence a woman who would not make him absolutely miserable. I question if he will find her, though. Oh ! dear, dear, what a world it is ! Only be your true self to-morrow and Monday, and you will do three good things—relieve me of a great anxiety, please George, and disappoint Peter and his wife. I saw them exchange glances when you refused wine at dinner and went to bed when the decanters were brought in."

On the morrow came young Peter and his sisters ; the latter average girls of the period, bright and agreeable, but perhaps too much given to gushing and giggling. They naturally made much of their Uncle George, and, perhaps

quite as naturally—though he did not think any the better of them for it—held themselves rather aloof from the Mintons. Their brother, who had just been received at the bar, was a tall young fellow with a pleasant smile and a slight stutter. He seemed to have the gift of taking life easy, was always either making a cigarette or smoking one, had a fund of amusing stories, which he told well—his stutter adding grace to his utterance ; was on the best of terms with his Aunt Mary, and made a boon companion of her husband. Everybody liked Peter II., but nobody—except perhaps his father and himself—thought he was likely to become a shining light in his profession.

In the morning all went to church, where they made a brave show. Mrs. Brandon wore her Cashmere shawl, Mary her bracelets and a grey silk dress—to buy which she had broken into one of her bank notes—while Katherine and Cordelia were as gorgeous as humming birds, and adorned with humps that would have made a camel die of envy. But the centre of attraction was George. A man of so distinguished appearance, who rumour endowed with untold wealth, was not seen at Fairmead Church every Sunday, and he received far more attention than the nervous young curate, who, under the impression that every eye was upon him, blushed up to the roots of his hair and trembled to the ends of his toes.

In the afternoon a walk in the forest ; in the evening music. Katherine and Cordelia sang hymns to their step-mother's accompaniment on the piano, their brother joining in with a very creditable tenor.

“Now for a smoke !” said Peter II., when the improvised

concert was concluded. "Can we go into your room, father?"

"Certainly. We will all go."

Mary cast a significant glance at George, which he fully understood. It meant—"Take care of my poor boy!"

The lighting of pipes and cigars was followed by the appearance of decanters and the usual etceteras. The two Peters took Scotch and Irish whisky respectively. At the first asking Harold refused point blank to drink anything.

"Come now," urged old Peter, "a drop of this 'Tetcher' will do you no harm. Or would you prefer brandy? It is the best Hennessy; been in my own cellar twenty years. There is not a headache in a hogshead of it. Say when!"

Harold did not say "when," and Peter, after half-filling Minton's tumbler with spirit, and adding some water, pushed it towards him.

George, puffing silently at his pipe, watched this proceeding with a sense of indignation. His brother knew Minton's failing, and whether from thoughtlessness or design, it was little less than a crime to expose him to temptation. George hoped that he would not fall into the trap, and for a while it seemed as if the hope would be justified. For nearly half-an-hour Harold took no notice of the glass. Then he looked at it, but only to turn his eyes in another direction. Next he stretched his hand towards the glass furtively, and glancing at George drew back hastily. This happened several times. He was evidently struggling hard against the growing desire, but desire won, the glass at length reached the eager lips, and half its contents were

swallowed at a single gulp. A few minutes later it was empty.

"Have a drop more, Minton?" said Peter, pointing to the decanter.

"Thank you," answered Harold.

"Allow me!" interposed George, making as if he would pass the bottle on to his brother-in-law, but placing it instead quite out of his reach.

"Take a cigar?"

Minton took one; then relapsed into moody silence. Old Peter looked annoyed, young Peter rolled his twentieth cigarette and after a momentary pause told another anecdote which made them all laugh, and conversation went on as if nothing particular had happened.

Shortly before midnight the party broke up.

"Will you leave these things here?" asked Peter II., pointing to the decanters.

"Yes, they will take no harm until morning," replied his father; "the servants are all in bed by this time. They go early on a Sunday night."

George and Minton went away together. They were lodged in almost contiguous rooms, and George did not part with Harold until he saw the latter's door close behind him. Then he turned into his own room, where he found Ali Baba, who never retired until his master dismissed him.

"You can go," said George, and then, according to his wont, sat down before his fire for a quiet read.

About twenty minutes later, and just as he had laid down his book, he heard a knock at the door.

"Come in!" he said, thinking it was Ali.

The door opened, and a tall, white figure entered.

"Mary!" he exclaimed, in great surprise. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"I hope not, but I fear—where is Harold?"

"In your room. I saw him go in myself not half-an-hour since."

"Then he must have gone out again. He is not there now. I tried to keep awake until he came, but I must have fallen asleep. What is to be done? I wouldn't for the world any of them should know. Did he—did he take anything?"

"He did, and I think I know where he is. Give me your candle; go into your own room, and wait there until I come back."

George crept noiselessly downstairs, went straight to the smoking-room, and there, as he expected, was Harold, one hand supporting his head, the other grasping a glass of cognac, and the half-emptied decanter before him.

"Come, no more of this!" George said, sternly, taking the glass from him, and pushing the decanter away. "Come, I say!"

"I'll see you d—— first. Who the devil are you to order me about? I shall not stir from here until—until I've drunk all this cognac; devilish good cognac it is, too. Been in old Peter's cellar twenty years. Not a headache in a hogshead of it. Good fellow, Peter! Sorry I called him bad names. Sorry I said——"

George took his brother-in-law by the shoulders, and shook him like a terrier shaking a rat—shook him till his teeth chattered and his head seemed like to come off.

Then grasping him by the coat collar and one of his arms, he whispered, fiercely—

“Come, this minute! And if you raise your voice or make the least noise, by Heaven, I’ll throttle you!”

Harold, now completely cowed, made no further resistance, and his brother-in-law half-carried, half-dragged him upstairs.

“Here he is, Mary,” said George. “Drunk now, I am sorry to say, but he will be sober by morning. To make sure of him I’ll lock the door outside. Ali shall unlock it in good time. He brings my tea at six o’clock. Nobody need be any the wiser. Peter is more to blame than Harold.”

And nobody was the wiser. Minton had wonderfully recuperative powers. A debauch that would have prostrated most men for days, only made him thirsty. There was nothing in his appearance next morning to suggest that he had drunk too much the night before, and during the day Mary never let him out of her sight, except when he was accompanied by George.

“I don’t know what you did to him last night,” she said to her brother, while Harold was looking after their luggage at the station, “but are you his master. I don’t think he will ever go wrong again when you are near.”

“I am afraid you overrate my influence. I had no idea it was so bad. I thought he was exaggerating the other day. It is really dreadful. What will become of him?”

“An interesting question, no doubt; but I am thinking, What will become of me and the girls?”

“Don’t let that trouble you, dear old child. I will take

care of you and the girls. We shall meet again soon, and if you find yourself in any sort of trouble or difficulty, be sure you let me know at once."

"God bless you, dear boy! But here is Harold, and the station-master seems wild with excitement. We must get in. Good-bye!"

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## CHAPTER IX.

### GEORGE'S WILL.

GEORGE turned pensively away. He felt melancholy. So far, at least, leaving India had not increased his happiness. He had exchanged a sunny clime and a serene existence for grey skies and multiplying worries. At Bombay he had no kinsfolk who loved him more for his money than himself. No sister cursed with a dipsomaniac husband, no brother-in-law with a weakness for strong drink. And Sister Evelyn! But bah! he cared nothing for her; at any rate he tried to think so. His chief pre-occupation now was Mary—what to do for her, how to deal with Harold. Peter was not so very far wrong, after all, in proposing a divorce—from a commonsense point of view.

The misfortune was that Mary refused to take a commonsense view. She refused to leave "her poor boy," and no scheme for her benefit, in which this fact was not fully recognised, would be acceptable. And it was impossible not to admire her unselfish devotion to the man who had spoiled her life. Commonsense was not everything. Peter had quite enough of that commodity for the entire family, And Minton was not a bad fellow, after all; more to be

pitied than blamed. If the poor devil could only be reclaimed ! That would be the best solution of the difficulty.

A very big IF—an enormous qualification. George doubted whether so confirmed a drunkard as Harold could be reclaimed—did not see his way to making the attempt. Persuasion was out of the question, coercion impossible. Obviously nothing was to be effected in that direction. All he could do was to get Mary away from that horrible Brick Street, and make life a little brighter for her—the sooner the better—and he resolved to see to it at once.

Outside the station, George, rather to his surprise, found Mrs. Brandon. She had driven Mary down in the pony tub while he and Minton walked.

“I had no idea you were waiting for me,” he said, “or I would not have loitered so long in the station.”

“Of course I waited for you. I know you don’t like walking, and”—smiling—“I like your society.”

“You are very kind, and I feel awfully flattered. Need I say that the liking is mutual?”

No mere compliment, for Rufine was a lively companion. Yet, if he had told the whole truth, he would probably have said that he preferred just then the companionship of his own thoughts.

If she had told the whole truth she would probably have added that she liked being seen in his society even more than she liked him. When out with her husband she was often rendered uncomfortable by the idea that people were making rude remarks about the disparity in their ages, and the wide contrast in their personal appearance, for she

flattered herself that she looked as much younger than her years as he looked older than his. Yet, as she drove away with George, she had the satisfaction of thinking that the people they met were admiring the charming Mrs. Brandon and her handsome brother-in-law, and talking, no doubt, about his fabulous wealth.

"*Quel beau garçon !*" she mentally exclaimed ; "not a white hair in his head. So strong too ! And I was reckoning on his money coming to us. *Quelle sottise !* And Peter was right ; he may marry, whether I will or not. With that superb physique and his fine fortune, somebody is sure to entrap him ; sure—sure ! These old bachelors who have never been in love are often the most easily captured. And George — he believes women are good ! *Mais quel malheur !*" And as the thought crossed Mrs. Brandon's mind, her lips were pressed close together, and the shadow of a frown flitted over her handsome face.

"You will let me take you to the opera on Wednesday night, I hope, you and the girls," said George, as he took the reins. "I have written about a box."

"How good you are ! With all my heart. And Katharine and Cordelia—I am sure they will be delighted. And tomorrow we shall have a long drive, *n'est ce pas ?* I want you to see something of this beautiful country."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure. We shall take the girls with us of course?"

"Of course. Peter also, if he will come."

But Peter declined ; he was too much occupied to give himself a holiday.

"I am a hard-working lawyer, not a rich Indian nabob,"

he said, smiling, "and I have children to provide for. By the-bye, that reminds me that I have a favour to ask you, George."

"I am sure I shall be very glad. What is it, Peter?"

"Well, Charles Kerrison died the other day, and he was to have been one of my executors. I shall have to put somebody in his place, and I want you to be the man—will you?"

"If you like. Only you must take into consideration the possibility, the almost certainty, I should say, of my being in India when—when I am wanted."

"Being in India! Why, I was hoping you had come home for good—that you would perhaps settle here for life."

This was a leading question. Peter wanted to find out how long his brother meant to stay.

"Not at all," returned George. "At one time I had some such idea. But no, I don't think I should care to settle in England. I should not be surprised if I were to go back before the year is out."

"I am sorry to hear you say that, old man, and I hope you will think better of it. Anyhow I shall make you one of my executors. I suppose you have not made your will?"

"No; why should I? Anything I have would be equally divided between you and Mary, or her children and yours, would not it?"

"Of course. All the same, it is always well to make a will—saves a deal of trouble, you know. And Mary's share should be strictly settled, otherwise it might pass to Minton, and though he is not likely to survive you and Mary, there is no telling——"

"'Gad! I never thought of that before. You are quite right, Peter. Life is uncertain, and if Minton happened— Yes, I must make my will. I suppose there is somebody in your office who could draw one up for me?"

"I will see to it myself. When can you give me your instructions?"

"Now. Two thousand pounds to my servant, commonly called Ali Baba; five thousand to my nephew and namesake, George Brandon, junior; the remainder of my estate to be equally divided between Mary and yourself, Mary's share to be strictly settled on her and her children."

"You will want trustees."

"I know. Put down yourself to begin with—one good turn deserves another, you know. But stay, you are to be one of my legatees, and trustees should be young. I have no doubt Thomas Bulteel, London manager of the Lahore Bank, and John Gambier, produce broker, Mincing Lane, would be willing to act, in case of need. They are both men of business, and neither is much over thirty."

"Nothing could be simpler," said Peter, making a few notes in his memorandum-book. "A draft shall be prepared at once, and, if you approve of it, the will itself can be ready for execution when you are next in town."

"Say Friday."

"Very well, Friday; sooner if you like."

"Thank you. Friday will be quite soon enough."

"As we are on business," observed Peter, putting his memorandum-book into his pocket, "as we are on business, I may as well mention another matter. I think I can put you in for a good thing, George; a very good thing."

"How? What sort of a good thing?"

"I think I can get you an allotment of shares in the Cascabel Gold Mining Company. At any rate, I have every reason to believe so. But there is such an enormous demand for them that I could not absolutely guarantee it, you know. I would, however, do my best, and as we are the solicitors, my recommendation goes for something, as you may easily suppose. For the same reason I know all the ins and outs of the affair. The investment is one I can cordially recommend. How many would you like?"

"Very much obliged, I am sure, old man; but I think I would rather not have any. I should have to draw on Bombay, and exchange is awfully bad just now — quite ruinous, in fact."

"But consider what a chance it is! You might count on a return of 25 per cent. at the very least; and by taking four hundred shares—a mere fleabite for a man of your means—you would be qualified for a director, and I daresay——"

"Heaven forbid! I would not become the director of a gold-mining company on any consideration. My partners in Bombay would think I had taken leave of my senses. And I don't want to make 25 per cent. I am quite content with the eight or nine I get from my Indian investments. Let somebody else have the chance. Take the shares yourself, Peter. You have your children to provide for, and I have none."

Peter contorted his leathery chops into the semblance of a smile, but inwardly he gnashed his teeth. This easy-going brother of his, so rich and so free with his money, was

quite as cautious and wide-awake as himself; obviously not the sort of man to be used as a spoon handle. Rufine smiled, too, for though she was vexed that George refused to be victimised—Peter, she knew, would have made a nice little commission on the proposed transaction—she could not help being amused at her husband's discomfiture and her brother-in-law's unexpected display of cuteness and caution. It began to dawn on her mind—as also, in a dim way, on Peter's—that George owed his fortune quite as much to his own personal qualities as to “good cards and blundering luck.”

The drive came off in due course, and proved a great success, perhaps all the more so that Peter did not make one of the party. He would have talked politics and been very much of a wet blanket, whereas George—who, although he had never liked any one woman well enough to marry her, took great pleasure in women's society, especially when they were young—possessed the art of making himself agreeable and talking down—or up—to their level. Katherine and Cordelia, who at times gushed exceedingly and used the strongest language they could think of without actually swearing, were continually exclaiming to each other—*sotto voce*—how “awfully nice” he was, and never lost an opportunity of protesting that Uncle George was “simply adorable.”

The adoration was, if possible, increased by the treat to the opera and the presentation to each of a superb diamond ring. Katherine, slim and sentimental, murmured a few incoherent words of gratitude and burst into tears; while Cordelia, demonstrative and muscular, threw her arms

round his neck, and after smothering him with kisses, gave him a hug that nearly took his breath away.

"I had forgotten where I put them, or I should have given you them sooner," said George, as soon as he had freed himself from the octopus-like embrace of his more stalwart niece. "If you don't like the setting I will get it exchanged for something more English and fashionable."

"Not for the world, Uncle George ; not for the world !" chorused the girls. "These are so awfully nice."

"So exquisitely original ; so too utterly sweet," simpered Katherine.

"So admirably original ; so extremely Oriental. I shall never look at it without thinking of dear, dear Uncle George !" said Cordelia.

"Nor I," echoed her sister. "Dear, dear Uncle George!"

"Yes, he is very dear to us all, but I don't think he wants to be quite kissed and hugged to death," interposed Rufine, as Cordelia made ready for another attack. "And it is quite time we made our toilettes for the opera. We must leave by the six o'clock train, remember."

"She is a nasty French cat," whispered Katherine to her sister, as the two went arm in arm to their own room. "Don't you see how jealous she is? I do believe she would like to tear our eyes out because he did not give her a diamond ring, too."

"As if she did not get a pearl necklace worth twice as much."

"Of course. She would like him to give everything to her and nothing to anybody else."

When they returned from the opera, which was as great a

success as the drive, George found a letter awaiting him. It was from his sister, and ran thus—

“He has gone — and worse. If you can come to me to-morrow, kindly do so. But do not say anything to any of the Peters. They will know soon enough.”

“Poor Mary !” he soliloquised. “I suppose Minton is on the loose again—but what can the worst be ?”

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## CHAPTER X.

### AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

AT breakfast next morning, George announced that he should go to town by an early train.

“I suppose you will call at the office,” said Peter, gravely ; “the will is ready for execution.”

“Probably. Anyhow, if I don’t call to-day I can call some other day.”

“You will be back in time for dinner, *cela va sans dire*,” observed Peter’s wife, airily.

“Yes, certainly. At any rate, I hope so,” answered George, absently. “I shall try to catch the 5-30 train.”

Two hours later he was in the classic region of Brick Street.

His sister, although she looked pale and anxious, received him with her usual composure.

“What is it, my poor Mary ?” he asked.

“I am in trouble, of course. It is almost my normal condition,” she answered, with a laugh, half-bitter, half-humorous, as if in the very perversity of her misfortunes she found something amusing. “If, by good luck, I happen to

be free from serious trouble for a short time I begin to fear that my evil genius has forgotten me and that I shall suffer for the lapse later on. It has been too good to last, lately, and when you came back and were so very kind and made me so happy for a few days, I felt quite sure that something bad would happen—and it has.”

“Harold has broken down, I suppose?”

“He has. That brandy he got at Peter’s put him all wrong. He has broken down and disappeared. Where he has gone I have not the least idea, but that is not the worst. He has taken nearly all the money you gave me; all but what I had in my pocket. I am very sorry——”

“The villain!” broke in George, hotly. “I felt sorry for him the other day, but now I begin to think that pathetic story of his two selves is all humbug. Rob his own wife! Why, what a low-lived, unprincipled scoundrel the fellow must be!”

“Don’t say that, George; remember he is my husband. I know him if anybody does, and I know that he is more to be pitied than blamed. When he comes to himself he will suffer agonies of remorse. His life will be a burden to him.”

“Let him take it, then. It is the best thing he can do.”

“You are so far right, that it would be better both for himself and others for Harold to die,” answered Mary, now hardly able to restrain her tears, “but I should not like my poor boy to commit suicide. As for this money he has taken, you are quite right, it is very bad. But the fault is in a great measure mine. I knew his weakness, and I

should have taken better care of the money. I did hide it, as I thought, safely, but when the craving is on him he is preternaturally sharp. If it had not been for that brandy at Peter's——"

"I am vexed with Peter. I believe he deliberately led Harold into temptation. He cannot forgive him. I do not think Peter has altered much—for the better. He actually wanted me to take shares in some confounded gold mine. But do not let the loss of the money trouble you. I will replace it——"

"Don't, please. It would perhaps go like the other.

But I am too poor to refuse money—and if you would let me have it in small sums——"

"Yes, that would perhaps be better. Shall I give you some now?"

"Oh, no! I have enough for the present. He did not take all—quite enough though—two hundred pounds. I had the rest in my purse."

"You would like to find him, I suppose?"

"Yes, George. If it were not for that money I should have no fear. He would have been back by this time. You would hardly believe it, but he was so conscious of his failing, poor boy, that for some time back he would take only just enough with him when he went to town to pay his 'bus fare. He was getting on so well, indeed, that I was almost daring to hope once more. But with all that money in his pocket, who can tell what has become of him? He may be drinking in some wretched gin-palace, or have fallen into bad hands and got robbed and murdered, or gone away, who knows where? You have never seen him when

the bad fit is on. It is literally as he told you—he is quite another being.”

“He shall be found, Mary; must be found, if only for your sake. I don’t think it will be very difficult. A man so bemused with drink as he is sure to be does not go far. The police shall be put on his track. I will offer a reward.”

“Not a public one, for Heaven’s sake!”

“Of course not. I shall simply make it known among the police.”

“And there is another thing we might do, which would perhaps be better even than telling the police. We were speaking of the Crusaders the other day. Well, they go almost everywhere—at any rate, I have heard so. There is hardly a haunt of vice and misery with which they are not familiar. They have a special organisation for rescuing the lost of both sexes, and if we were to give them a description of my poor boy, I am sure——”

“An excellent idea. I will see them at once. I suppose they can be got at?”

“Easily. I have a paper somewhere which gives full particulars.”

“Well, I will seek them out and give them a cheque; that will put me on a good footing with them.”

“I daresay,” said Mary, bitterly “There is nothing these religious people seem to crave so much for as money. Souls cannot be saved without sovereigns, you know. I daresay, now, these Crusaders could tell you exactly how much it costs to convert a sinner. The redemption of the world resolves itself into a question of pounds, shillings and pence, to hear some people talk.”

"I daresay—to hear some people talk ; but we need not heed their talk, you know. However, never mind that now. I will telegraph to Ali to come up and bring me some things. I shall stay in town until this business is put through."

"You are very kind. But I would not say that, if I were you. It may never be put through, if you mean finding my poor boy. I don't know how it is, but I never felt the same about him before. I have a presentiment——"

"Bother your presentiments. He will be found ; never fear. Have you any photographs of him ? I had better have one or two."

Mary answered in the affirmative, and gave him two cartes-de-visite.

"I will look you up again to-morrow," he said. "I shall stay at my club. I think they have some beds there. If you hear anything during the day, drop me a line to-night ; you know the address—'The Saunterers' Club, St. James's Street.'"

"You are very fortunate, George," she said, as he rose to go. "No cares, few responsibilities, good looks, good health and plenty of money. You should be happy ; and if money could save a man you should be a saint."

"I am not that by a long way, Mary. Indeed, I begin to think that I have led, so far, a very selfish and not particularly useful life, thinking very much of my own ease and comfort, and doing very little to help my less fortunate fellowmen."

"You are not singular. It is the same with us all at the bottom. People sometimes praise what they call my

devotion to Harold. But really, you know, that is all nonsense. I loved him in the first instance because I could not help it; I cling to him now because I fear that if I were to leave him I should be more unhappy still. We are all selfish alike."

"That won't do, Mary. A woman who gives up her life to a man thinks more of him than herself, which is just the reverse of selfishness. I know I am not capable of such devotion. For no woman that ever breathed would I——"

"Hold, brother! None of us know what we are capable of until we are put to the test. You are not too old to become as foolishly attached to a woman as ever I was to my poor boy. I hope you won't though. Yet there is no telling. We shall see."

"Yes, we shall see," returned George, with a careless laugh. "Good-bye! If you don't see me to-morrow you will hear from me."

"No," he soliloquised, in the privacy of his hansom, "I have not done much so far for the happiness of others, and my late efforts in that direction are not precisely encouraging. I play the part of mediator, bring about a reconciliation between Peter and the Mintons, with the result that Harold gets drunk and plays the devil. I give Mary money, her husband bolts with it, and as likely as not it may be the death of him. Poor Mary! I don't seem to have helped her much; and I am by no means sure that I am helping her now. He will be a curse to her as long as he lives, and if he would disappear for good—— However, I have promised; and if I had not, it would be my duty to look after him all the same. An awful bore, though."

He went to Scotland Yard, gave full particulars about the missing man, left one of his photographs, and intimated that he would pay liberally for news of Minton's whereabouts or his fate.

Then to the headquarters of the Crusaders in the City. At the very top of the building was a huge board, whereon was printed in graphic characters—"ARE YOU SAVED?"

At first George thought he had made a mistake, that it was the sign of a pushing barber who dropped his aitches; the question in its literal acceptance seemed so impertinent and almost blasphemous, as if signifying that if you wanted salvation this was the shop where it could be had for the asking. Nevertheless, he went in. The ground floor actually was a shop, where red shirts, braided caps and other crusading paraphernalia were on sale, as also portraits of the Chief Crusader. When George made it known that he wanted to offer a donation, he secured immediate attention, and was directed to go up a flight of stairs—a sort of Jacob's ladder, up and down which a crowd of not very angelic-looking Crusaders were continually ascending and descending—and knock at a certain door. On entering the room indicated, he found himself in the presence of several officers in uniform, and a number of privates in *mufti*, who were directing envelopes and folding letters as diligently as if their salvation depended on doing a certain quantity in a given time. There were also two or three officers in petticoats, whose costume, if not their appearance, reminded him of Sister Evelyn. On the floor were baskets full of letters, and the walls were adorned with portraits of the Chief, and

hung with printed sheets, showing how the crusading forces were distributed and where stationed.

George mentioned his business to the officer who seemed most in authority, and whom the others addressed as "Commandant," a sallow-complexioned little man, with a short black beard and dark, deep-set eyes. He wanted to give something to the cause, he said, tendering at the same time a five pound note, but not for processions, bands, banners, or that sort of thing; perhaps they would be his almoners and bestow it among the poor.

"I think I know what you mean," said the commandant, quietly; "you are evidently not saved, or you would know us better. We want money badly for our rescue work. Will you let us use it for that purpose?"

Whereupon he explained that they had a special organisation for the rescue, morally and materially, of the fallen of both sexes, and restoring to their friends such of them as had friends, and that to this end many of their people were quartered in the worst parts of the town and spent their lives in the slums.

"By all means," answered George, "let it go for that. If I am not saved myself, it is a satisfaction to think I can do something towards saving others. And now I want you to do me a service in return. If it costs anything I shall be glad to pay all expenses, and a little more." And then he inquired whether they could help him to find Minton, of whom he gave a full description.

"We can try," answered the commandant; "the case shall be put into the hands of our rescue brigade. But a man with two hundred pounds in his pocket is not likely to turn

up in the slums. Still, there is no telling ; much stranger things than that have happened. I will ask our people, if they come across anyone answering to this description, to let you know."

On this George thanked the man and withdrew. He felt that he had done all that was possible for the time being, and after despatching two telegrams, one to Ali, one other to Rufine, saying that business would probably detain him in town for several days, he went to his club and dined there alone. Sitting afterwards in the smoking-room, reading rather absently an article in one of the reviews, he fell into a reverie, which was fast becoming a dream, when he heard a voice close by which roused him to full wakefulness as effectually as a bugle call could have done.

"Yes, I saw a lot of service in the Mutiny year," it was saying, "and I had several narrow squeaks for my life. I led the storming party at——"

And then the voice dropped so low that he heard no more. Yet it seemed strangely familiar to him. But the rubicund visage of that middle-aged man, where had he seen it before—when and where last? It must be a long time since, if ever, for though the voice was familiar the face was strange. While he was still pondering the question, the owner of the face turned George's way. The next moment he sprang to his feet.

"Pray excuse me," he exclaimed, "but that chain—I should know it anywhere, and though you are much altered you are, you must be, the George Brandon whose acquaintance I made at the battle of Giglipatam."

"And you are Captain Somers."

"I was once ; but now I am Colonel Somers—on half-pay—and you ?"

"I am plain George Brandon—not even a cornet, much less a colonel on half-pay."

"Ah, I remember now. You left the service a long time since."

"Yes, and went into trade."

"I hope it has answered your purpose."

"Well, I have made money, if that is what you mean. But I would much rather be a soldier. I left the service in a moment of pique, and have regretted it ever since."

"You did very well, I think. Look at me, laid on the shelf in the prime of life ; and if it were not for poor Jack's legacy we should not be too well off. Been at home long ?"

"Only a few weeks. This is my first visit to England since I went out, and you know how long ago that is. How is Mrs. Somers ?"

"Not very first-rate, I am sorry to say. We live at Hampstead. You must come and see her. Come and take pot-luck with us to-morrow, if you have nothing better to do. My wife will be delighted to see you. We dine at half-past seven ; nobody but ourselves—quite *en famille*, you know."

George accepted the invitation, partly because he had nothing better to do, but chiefly because he wanted to see how Mrs. Somers, whom he had last seen as a young bride, looked as a middle-aged woman.

"Rather strange we should meet here," he observed. "You're not a Saunterer, I think ?"

"Not strange at all, I should say. London is just the

place for meeting people. I am always knocking against fellows that I have not seen for an age. No, I am not a Saunterer. I am a Rag man. I have been dining with Major MacTavish. Let me introduce you."

The introduction took place, and the three men, drawing their chairs together, fought some of their battles over again, had a long talk about India, and did not separate until the clock of St. James's Palace struck the first hour of another day.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### A SURPRISE.

BEFORE going to Brick Street, George called again at Scotland Yard. He did not expect that the police could have heard anything of Minton so soon, but he wanted, if possible, to pick up a few crumbs of comfort for his sister, who, as he could well see, would persist in believing that Harold had come to some ill until she received assurance to the contrary.

"No news yet," said the inspector, who had charge of the case, "and you must not look for any this week. I daresay we shall find him, however. It is not as if Mr Minton wanted to get out of the country. He is somewhere in London, I have no doubt."

"But are not people worse to find in London than anywhere else?"

"If they keep close and don't betray themselves, they are. And if Mr. Minton has got inside some public-house and sticks there, it may be weeks before we find him—not

until his money is done. And there is another point to be considered. London is not exactly the safest place in the world for a drunken man with two hundred pounds in his pocket. He might be robbed, or worse ; and Brick Street is not far from the river. However, I have sent a description of him to the Thames Division, and asked them to keep a sharp look-out."

This was not very reassuring, and it is hardly necessary to say that George did not deem it expedient to impart the inspector's grim suggestion to his sister. He merely told her that both the police and the Crusaders were doing all they could, and that they expected to have news of him in a few days.

"Of course. They are sure to say that. All the same, I very much doubt it. He will not be heard of till his money is done, and then he will come back—if he is alive. The best thing that could happen to my husband—next to dying—would be to lose the use of his legs."

"Lose the use of his legs ! What on earth for, Mary ?"

"Because if he lost the use of his legs he would be obliged to stay at home, and I would take good care that he did not drink. Besides, he never tries to drink at home. Yes, George, if Harold could not walk, I should be a happy woman."

"Yes, you would have the upper hand of him then, and no mistake. But you care too much about him, my poor Mary. He really is not worth it."

"I know that quite well ; but you must remember that, being a woman—more's the pity—I naturally go by the rule of contrary. I was looking for him last night and nearly

all this morning, yet dreading to find him, though I felt sure I should not."

"Where have you been?"

"Wherever I was likely to find drunken men—at public-house doors and such like places."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. Don't be shocked. I have done it many a time before and taken no harm. It is better than stewing here in my own juice."

"You may do it once too often though, and there are some very rough places in this neighbourhood. Why did you come here?"

"To be as far away from old friends and associations as possible, and because it is cheap living."

"Well, if you must go about looking for your vagabond husband, you shall not go alone. My servant Ali shall go with you, or at any rate follow you. As he wears a castor and a black coat at present, and is not very much darker than a swarthy Spaniard or Italian, he almost passes for a European."

"Would he be any good, do you think?"

"I don't quite know what you mean by good. But he has eyes like needles, and knows Harold; and if I tell Ali to kill anybody who molests you, Ali will do it."

"An admirable man! By all means send him. But please tell him not to kill anybody without my orders. It would be a pity for such a true and faithful servant to get himself hanged without sufficient cause."

The breezy heights of Hampstead, whither George betook himself a few hours after leaving his sister, were a pleasant

change from the sordid surroundings of Brick Street. Colonel Somers lived in a charming little house, covered with greenery and surrounded by a shady garden, where George, who was a little before his time, found his host hard at work—for the old soldier had literally turned his sword into a pruning hook, and took as much pride in his flower-beds as he had once taken in his regiment.

"Come into the house," he said, after showing his guest some of his floral treasures, "and keep my wife company while I go and dress."

Mrs. Somers was reposing languidly on a sofa, reading a French novel—a tall, bony woman, with fine eyes, but a querulous, discontented face and long, lean neck. It was hard to believe that men had once gone wild about her, and that one man had so loved her that he sacrificed his life in order, as he thought, that she might be happy.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Brandon," she said. "It is so pleasant to meet anybody who has been in India. How do you like England?"

"Pretty well. Not quite as well as I expected, though. I like sunshine."

"I don't like it at all—the climate, I mean; it is simply detestable. And the servants make life a burden. I don't think you will stay long. I would not if I were you. Do you find me much changed?"

"Well, just a little. Twenty years, you know——" answered Brandon, who was not apt at turning insincere compliments.

"Ah, time, time!" sighed the lady, "it is making us all old and ugly. But it has been very good to you, Mr.

Brandon. True, you look older ; yet you are not like me, you do not look old. People may say what they like about India, but I am sure one ages faster here than there. You still wear Captain Foster's chain. Do not open the locket, please, the contrast would be too awful. Poor Jack ! What a splendid fellow he was. So noble and devoted ! I shall never forget him," and a tear rolled down her attenuated cheek.

Did she regret having preferred Tom to Jack, after all ? It almost seemed so ; and it would be exactly like a woman, thought George, to repine because she had got her own way.

"I had not the pleasure of knowing Captain Foster," he said, "but from all I have heard, he was everything you say, and your husband——"

"Here he is, and my sister !" interrupted Mrs. Somers, with sudden animation. "Let me introduce you ; Mr. Brandon, Miss Waters—Miss Waters, Mr. Brandon."

George, who was sitting with his back to the door, rose from his chair, turned round, and the next moment found himself shaking hands with—Sister Evelyn !

Nobody else. He could hardly believe his eyes. But though the poke bonnet was gone, and the Crusader uniform replaced by a black lace dress, there was no mistaking the power of that expressive face, the pose of that stately head, the tender beauty of those golden eyes.

He could hardly believe his ears. How was it possible for Evelyn to be Mrs. Somers's sister, or rather, how could Mrs. Somers's sister have become a Crusader ? The Waters were a proud, High Church family. Did she want to recognise him ? It seemed not. She made no sign, and

perceiving that she desired to ignore their meeting at White-shingles, George uttered a few commonplaces and resumed his seat.

"Why, now I think of it, you two have met before, though neither of you appear to know it," exclaimed Mrs. Somers.

"Of course they have," laughed her husband. "I knew it all along, though I did not say anything."

"When and where?" asked Evelyn, quickly, at the same time casting a dubious glance at Brandon.

"Time, 1858 or 1859; place, Delhi. Don't you remember General Waters—then Colonel—and his daughters, Brandon?"

"Of course I do. There were a good many, I think."

"Rather! Well, Evelyn was the youngest, but as she was only about seven or eight years old at the time, it is not likely you will remember her."

"I remember several young ladies; but I should not have known Miss Waters, and it is hardly possible she could know me."

"No," replied Evelyn, with a smile. "So many officers came to our house at Delhi, and we children saw very little of them. I left India when I was seven years old, and when I look back on my life there it seems like a dream. So many things have happened since."

"And some of them not very pleasant things," put in Mrs. Somers, bitterly. "I wish we could put back time fifteen or twenty years, and that we were all in India and away from this foggy and sunless country."

"A foolish wish," returned Evelyn, gravely. "How do

you know we should make a better use of it? And I don't know that life is so very happy that we should want to live it over again—if we have to go through the same experiences."

"Oh, you! . . . but perhaps, everybody has not been so—— I mean others may not have the same—the same views—or have gone through the same experience—— All not are alike, you know. Ah, there goes the gong, and here comes Alice to tell us dinner is ready!" exclaimed Mrs. Somers, joyfully, for she was getting rather mixed, and regarded the interruption as a small godsend.

George offered her his arm, and Colonel Somers followed with Evelyn.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### HOME THRUSTS.

"My sister has very peculiar views," said Mrs. Somers, in an undertone, "and does strange things sometimes. But as she is of age, and her own mistress, I do not hold myself in any way responsible. And great allowance must be made for her. She is the youngest of the family and has had trials."

"Indeed!" said George, to whom the connection between the fact of Evelyn being the youngest of the family and having had trials, was not quite apparent, "I am sorry to hear that; and she so young, too."

And then he paused, hoping for further revelations, but after remarking—just a little tartly—that her sister was nearly twenty-five, Mrs. Somers abruptly changed the

subject, and left him as much in the dark as ever. What could have happened to turn Miss Waters into a Crusader! That something had happened he entertained no doubt whatever, even before Mrs. Somers mentioned that her sister had undergone trials—and why did they all so completely ignore the fact? Perhaps Somers would be more communicative—good cheer generally loosens a man's tongue—but though they sat awhile after the ladies left the dining-room, and smoked several cigarettes, the Colonel declined to be drawn into conversation about his sister-in-law and the Waters family.

"Evelyn is a deuced fine woman; I respect her immensely. But she has her own views, and goes her own way, and since her father died she has been practically her own mistress," was almost the only observation on the subject he could be induced to make.

"General Waters is dead, then?"

"Yes. He died nearly four years since. I think I did not tell you that I met old Selborne one day at the Rag. He was Provost Marshal after Giglipatam. He has got liver, of course—always too fond of pegs—and can hardly get one leg before the other, poor old chap. And MacAllister, you remember MacAllister—— Before your time, was he? Oh, yes; I was forgetting that I am eight or ten years your senior. How time does fly to be sure when a man gets past forty! However, he once told me about the best tiger story I ever heard, and I have heard a good many. He was hunting in the Sunderbunds——"

And so on, and so on. Anything to avoid talking about the Waterses in general, and Evelyn in particular.

The tiger story finished, the two men betook themselves to the drawing-room and drank tea with the ladies. A little later Mrs. Somers, who seemed to be suffering and complained of headache, withdrew. Then the conversation, which had been nearly altogether about India, and did not appear to interest Miss Waters much, began to languish, and Colonel Somers, who, like most old Indians, rose early, and had been out all day in the open air, began to nod. After a few vain efforts to fight the drowsy god off, he fell fast asleep, and George and Evelyn were virtually *en tête-à-tête*.

"Tom is a man of wonderfully regular habits," said Evelyn, with a smile. "He is invariably asleep at half-past nine, and as invariably wakens up at the stroke of ten."

"So he will sleep half-an-hour."

"If we don't wake him; but he will be very sorry. I think I really must rouse him."

"Pray don't, Miss Waters. Let him have his sleep out, by all means. It would be a pity, not to do; and I am glad of the opportunity. I want to have a quiet talk with you. We are old acquaintances, it seems."

"Of nearly twenty years' standing, didn't Tom say?"

"Well, it is quite eighteen since I was at your father's house in Delhi. Do you know, I have been trying nearly all the evening to identify your features with those of one of the little girls I saw there?"

"You failed, of course. It is so long since. Our thoughts appear to have been rather similar. I have tried to remember you."

"And did you succeed?" asked George, eagerly.

"Not in the least. It is a very long time ago, and you must have altered very much."

"You remember seeing me at Whiteshingles, however?"

"Very well—and your liberality. It was very good of you to listen so attentively and give so generously."

"Two sovereigns, that was not much. That sermon of yours was worth ten times the money."

"Don't call it a sermon, please. It was only——"

"What?"

"A few words."

"A few words spoken in season, let us say."

"If you like to put it in that way."

"And they were well spoken. I thought, though, you were rather rough on the rich."

"I don't think I was unjust; that I said anything that was not true. I don't want to be unjust to anybody, even in my mind. I spoke of a class, not of individuals. I know rich people who spend their lives and fortunes in doing good. But how many are there who act as if they thought wealth and social position the only things worth living for! Even parental love is perverted; they sacrifice their children to Moloch. I could tell you. And what is more, nearly all of them profess to be religious; go to church on Sundays, clothed in purple and fine linen, bow at the name of Jesus, and fancy they are followers of the Master who told the rich young man, if he would be perfect, to sell all that he had and give to the poor."

"I am sorry to be the object of your denunciation, Miss Waters."

"You! But surely——"

"Well, I don't make any great professions, nor am I guilty of going to church every Sunday, by a long way. But I fear I belong to the selfish rich."

"I am very sorry if I have hurt your feelings ; I did not mean to," said Evelyn, softly, and with heightened colour.

"You did not hurt my feelings. You only reminded me of a fact. But do not set me down, please, as a mere money-grubber. I am not even a merchant by predilection. As I failed to make myself a name or attain high rank in the army, I resolved to succeed in something else. I went into trade, as being about the only occupation open to me, and I have succeeded—so well that I should not object, under certain conditions, to give it up altogether. I don't think I am likely to become a miser. But money is a power, and I don't mean to throw mine away. I will try to do some—what you call 'good' with it, though, if you will show me the way."

"I! Why do you ask me, Mr. Brandon?" exclaimed Evelyn, in evident surprise at George's proposal to become her pupil in well-doing.

"Because you know how to bestow money to advantage, and I do not. I should probably do more harm than good if I made the attempt. You go amongst these people and I daresay know of deserving cases."

"Many, Mr. Brandon—many. Yes, I could do a great deal of good with——"

"How much?"

"Twenty pounds. But that is a great deal," she added, hastily, as if shocked by her own audacity. "Ten pounds would go a long way."

George smiled.

"Do you live here? Is this your home, I mean?"

"I have no home."

"No home!"

"Perhaps I ought rather to say that I have several homes, for more than one house is always open to me. But I have no fixed place of abode, no *domicile connu*, as the French say. I am a wanderer, nearly always on the move, and to tell the truth, rather like it. A life of calm and contemplation would not suit me at all."

"I understand. You go about with those people—have to go where you are ordered, I suppose."

"Oh, no! I am only a volunteer, and as I occupy no official position in the army, I go where I like—where I think I can be most useful."

"How came you to join the Crusaders? They seem a rowdy, vulgar lot, and no fit associates for a woman of culture and refinement."

An expression of intense pain passed over Evelyn's face. Brandon saw that he had unwittingly made a serious mistake.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Waters," he added, earnestly. "The remark was quite uncalled for; I had no right to make it. It seemed so strange meeting you at Whiteshingles as a Crusader and then here as an old acquaintance, that I felt——"

"Curious, I suppose; and legitimately so," returned Evelyn, who had now recovered her composure. "I really think I owe you some explanation, the more especially as you were so kind as not to mention the incident before my sister and brother-in-law."

"I thought from your manner that you did not want your sister to know."

"Oh, they know quite well that I am a volunteer in the Crusader Army. We have had some very warm discussions on the subject, and they have tried much and more to persuade me to give it up. At last, when they were convinced that it was of no use, and that we were never likely to agree on the subject, we made a treaty of peace, the essential conditions of which were that I should be allowed to go my own way, and no further mention of the Crusader Army was to be made amongst us. If they knew that you had seen me with the Crusaders at Whiteshingles, it would not only give them pain, but might possibly lead to further discussions, our agreement to the contrary notwithstanding."

"I understand," answered George, as if he were quite satisfied, although he was as far as ever from being enlightened as to the original cause of her connection with the Crusaders. "I understand, and I think you were quite right. But—excuse me for asking the question—do you really like associating with these people? Do you think they do any sort of good?"

"To both your questions I say emphatically, 'Yes.' There are a great many low and vulgar people among them, you think. Naturally; the Founder of Christianity sought His converts among the poor and lowly; there was nothing He so much detested as the smug respectability of the well-to-do. You object to their methods, perhaps, and their military organisation. Well, they want most of all to save waifs and strays and castaways; the great army of Miserables,

which no other religious body either reaches or seriously attempts to reach. The only way to do this is to go literally into the highways and byeways and drum them up, and, so to speak, drag them in. As for the military organisation, I cannot urge that it is an ideal system, but you must take human nature as it is, and there can be no question that the discipline, titles, uniforms, music and the rest, generate an enthusiasm and create an *esprit de corps* which have proved wonderfully effective."

"I have no doubt of it. We are all fond of excitement, and anything which breaks the dull monotony of life is pretty sure to be popular. Processions and street preachings as conducted by the Crusaders do this; they are noisy and lively. Going to church does not. Nothing in this world is more monotonous than the traditional sermon of the average parson. But what is the positive result—as regards this world, I mean? I know these Crusaders are all persuaded of their individual salvation. But to be always thinking about the safety of one's soul is surely not less ignoble than to be always thinking about the comfort of one's body. Both are rather low forms of selfishness. Far nobler, it seems to me, would it be to try to make the world better, as well for those who are of it as for those who may come after us.

"Perhaps you are right. But how few seriously try to do this! Do you, Mr. Brandon?"

"A home thrust! You have me there, Miss Waters," laughed George. "I acknowledge the impeachment. I cannot honestly say that I have tried at all, and but for you, I question whether I should have so much as thought of trying."

"But for me!"

"Yes. It was your word in season at Whiteshingles that set me thinking on the subject. It has been in my mind ever since, and I really mean to try, so soon as I can see my way."

Evelyn's eyes brightened with pleasure.

"I am so glad," she said; "so glad that any poor words of mine should influence for good a man like you. Acknowledge, now, that the Crusaders do occasionally achieve some positive results."

"Another home thrust! Well, you are so far right that if I had not heard your band that Sunday morning I should neither have seen you nor heard your sermon, which would have been a great loss to me in many ways. But, acknowledge on your part, that your 'word in season' was not quite in the usual Crusader style. I don't think that little jumping captain liked it much."

"Perhaps not. I have never pretended to accept the Chief's theology. Yet all who believe in Christ may take part in the movement and co-operate in the work. And the positive results on which you lay so much stress are really very great. I know of no religious or philanthropic organisation that can vie with the Crusaders in doing actual material good. To begin with, all their converts must be teetotallers, and when it is remembered how terrible are the evils caused by drink this alone is an immense gain. They have special organisations for reclaiming the fallen, homes where poor lost girls are received and cherished, and, if they are willing, put into a better way of life; places where discharged prisoners, be their crimes what they may, are taken in and provided with

food and shelter and honest work. None are turned away, for the Crusaders regard these castaways as sisters and brothers—the more they have sinned the more they are to be pitied. Those who condemn the Crusaders condemn Christianity, for with all their faults—and Heaven knows they are not perfect—they come the nearest to the primitive Christian ideal. The Quakers did so once, and in theory do so still. But now they are all smugness and respectability, like the rest.”

“Well, they don’t seek proselytes among publicans and sinners. Scratch a Quaker of the period and you are pretty sure to find a millionaire.”

Here the clock on the mantelpiece struck ten, and Colonel Somers woke up.

“God bless me!” he exclaimed, “I am afraid I have been asleep. Why did you not waken me, Evelyn?”

“Mr. Brandon would not let me, and I knew that you would waken at your usual time.”

“My usual time! You will be making Brandon believe that I am guilty of a similar rudeness every night. It is only when I have been all day in the garden. It is about time we had the decanters in, isn’t it?”—ringing the bell—“Take a peg, Brandon?”

George took a peg, and half-an-hour later he took his leave.

“I suppose you will be staying here some time, Miss Waters?” he said, as they shook hands.

“A few days. Probably until next Monday.”

“Why, what a rolling-stone you are, Evelyn!” said Colonel Somers. “Where are you going next?”

"I have work to do in the town that will occupy me a week or so, and then I must go to Beech Hall. It is an invitation of long standing, and Mrs. Pemberton, who is far from well, says she particularly wants to see me."

"Everybody who is in trouble wants to see you, I think, Evelyn. Why, Beech Hall is in your neighbourhood, Brandon; I mean in the neighbourhood of Fairmead."

"Is it?" said George, carelessly, "I know hardly anything of the country yet. Have had only one drive, in fact. In what direction does it lie?"

"Right across the forest towards Waltham; about four or five miles, isn't it, Evelyn?"

"Yes; but Beech Hall is not a grand place—only a farmhouse—and the Pembertons are not grand people."

"Are you chaffing, Miss Waters, or do you really think I am too much of a swell to know common people? Don't judge me until you know me better, if you please."

"Come again soon, now you know the way, old man," said Colonel Somers. "Don't stand upon ceremony, we shall be delighted to see you at any time."

"Thanks, I will come again soon. Had a very pleasant evening," returned George, as he got into his cab, for he remained true to his principal of never walking when he could by any possibility ride.

"I don't think Brandon knows," said Colonel Somers, when he joined his wife.

"I am sure he does not; I should be surprised if he did. It was kept as quiet as such a thing could be, and he has not met anybody who would be likely to tell him."

"He is curious, though; and don't you think we ought to tell him?"

"Certainly not. Why should we? It is no affair of his."

"Of course it is not. Only Evelyn is a taking sort of woman, and he seemed to admire her, rather, and it would only be fair, you know."

"That is nothing. It is easy to see what Mr. Brandon is—a confirmed old bachelor and general admirer, fond of flirting but afraid of matrimony. Men of his age don't fall in love with the first pretty woman they meet. But what a match for her it might have been!"

"She would not have him, Lillian. She would think him too worldly."

"I don't know. There are few women, let them be as saintly and sanctimonious as they may, who would refuse George Brandon—if he courted them in earnest. But it cannot be; the more's the pity."

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### GEORGE'S PLAN OF CAMPAIGN.

"I LIKE Evelyn Waters," soliloquised George Brandon, as he was driven down the Finchley Road. "A true woman, every inch of her; neither a simpering miss, a girlish hoyden, a husband-hunting hack, nor a fine lady. She has a good face, too, and a splendid physique; ideas of her own, and resolution enough to break with conventionalities and go her own way when she deems her own way right. Sweet tempered, too, unless her looks belie her. What glorious

eyes she has got! And if she is emotional in religion and thinks so much better of people than they deserve—what of that? It only shows that she has a lofty soul and a sympathetic mind. What a grand wife she would make for a man she could really love! . . . She shall be my wife. Never before did I see a woman I so much liked. All the same I am not—— It would be too absurd at my time of life to fall in love, like the last griff out.

“How shall I win her? That is the next question. I am not going to spoon about—whisper soft nothings and write twaddling rhymes, as I might have done a dozen years ago. I must *brusquer* the situation; take her with a rush. What is her weak point? Oh, I have it! She has a passion for doing good; she wants to help the poor—dear soul. I will help her to help the poor; but delicately, and in a way that will get me into her good graces. I must make a call there in two or three days—it is the right thing to do after one has dined—and I shall perhaps see her again. She will be at Beech Hall in a week or so. I will walk over. I can easily find an excuse for looking in; the Pembertons are not swells. It's an awfully long way though from Fairmead—five miles—a great deal too far to walk. But I could not take any of Peter's traps. Rufine would be wanting to go with me—she is as sharp as needles, that woman—and Peter's horses are too heavy for riding. I wonder why he buys such big brutes. I'll buy one or two of my own—something that will carry me to hounds next season—and then I can go where I like, without anybody being the wiser.

“When Evelyn has consented, all the world may know. In the meanwhile, however, I would not have anybody

so much as guess what I am thinking about. Another reason for putting the thing through without delay. Delays are dangerous; and why should I delay? We know all about each other, we are both of age, and—yes—I think I can afford to keep a wife.”—laughing quietly to himself. “Settlements would be no inducement for a woman like Evelyn: but she shall have them for all that.

“I wonder what the trials were that Mrs. Somers mentioned, and how Evelyn came to join the Crusaders. Family troubles arising out of her father’s death, probably. She is evidently very tender-hearted. But I shall learn all about that later on. ‘Sufficient for the day’—no, hang it, I must not say ‘evil’; that would never do. Rather, sufficient for the day is the joy thereof. I have found an ideal woman and I am going to make her my wife.”

In all this it did not occur to George Brandon that he might be counting his chickens before they were hatched, or that he was absurdly presumptuous in concluding that he could win Evelyn Waters so easily and so soon; that he could take her with a rush, as he put it to himself. He was simply a strong-willed man, who had hitherto succeeded in all his undertakings. In the army he gained honour and promotion, and quitted it only because he could not brook what he deemed injustice; and if he could have stooped to be deferential to a man whom he despised, he might have remained in the service of the Rajah of Ravancore as long as he thought fit. In trade, thanks to a happy combination of shrewdness, audacity and courage, he had succeeded beyond his hopes, and made a large fortune. Though far from being a vain man, he did not ignore his personal

advantages. He knew that women's hearts are not made of adamant, and it may be granted that he had fair grounds for hoping that the qualities which had served him so effectually in commerce and war, would serve him equally well in love. He had, moreover, formed a theory as to Evelyn's disposition, and laid a plan which, as will be seen, he put into action with characteristic promptitude. On one point he was perhaps in error. He tried to believe that his preference for Miss Waters was a mere liking—a matter of deliberate choice. He would not admit, even to himself, that he had committed the weakness or the folly of falling in love. Whether he had or not the issue will show.

Early next morning George went into the city, and on the evening of the same day Miss Waters received a packet, the contents of which surprised her more than ever she had been surprised before—except once. But it was an agreeable surprise—the other a terrible shock that nearly overturned her reason, and altered the whole course of her life.

The packet contained a pass book, a cheque book, and a letter. The letter ran thus :—

“DEAR MISS WATERS,

“You told me yesterday how much good you could do with a few pounds, even so few as ten. It pained me then, and it pains me still, to think how often I literally throw away sums which, judiciously bestowed, might lessen the misery of the destitute. But I am in this position. I have been so long out of England that I really don't know how to set about the task I would fain undertake—how to give without doing more harm than good. I intend to learn, but meanwhile I want you, who are so conversant

with the poor, and know so well their needs—I want you to do me the great favour of acting as my almoner. I know that I am taking an immense liberty, but I trust that, considering the circumstances, you will not refuse my request.

“To make the task as easy for you as may be, I have opened an account in your name at the Union Bank, and placed to your credit a thousand pounds; as you will see by the enclosed pass book. You will also find enclosed a cheque book, and a form for your signature. If you will put your name to the latter and return it to the Union Bank—envelope enclosed—you can draw against the deposit in such amounts as you may find convenient, and every week I will pay to your credit a sum equivalent to your drawings. You will thus *always* have a thousand pounds at your disposal for charitable purposes.

“I need hardly say that I make no conditions whatever. Dispose of the money as you think best, and get whatever clerical or other help you may require, which will of course, be at my charge.

“Lastly. There is nothing I so much detest as ostentation. Except so far as you are concerned, let me be a nobody. If it be necessary to mention the donor at all, you can say he desires to be known merely as ‘A friend.’

“I know it is a great piece of presumption on my part to seek to impose this burden on you, and if you decline to undertake it, I shall be quite sure—however much I may regret your decision—that you have acted rightly.

“Yours respectfully,

“GEORGE BRANDON.”

Within the next four hours came the answer, as follows:—

“DEAR MR. BRANDON,

“You quite overwhelm me. Never before have I had experience of so great generosity. But the responsibility of dealing with so much money is also very great, and though I accept it for the sake of the many whose lives your beneficence will make brighter, I do so reluctantly and almost in fear and trembling, lest I should not prove worthy of the trust. I shall respect your anonymity, as you desire, but you must let me render regular accounts of my stewardship. On no other condition could I consent to act as your almoner.

“In the name of the poor, whose distress your liberality will enable me to relieve, and my own, I thank you, and praying that God will bless both the giver and the gift,

“I remain, dear Mr. Brandon,

“Yours sincerely,

“EVELYN WATERS.”

“Exactly what I wanted,” murmured George, as, after reading the letter three times, he placed it carefully in his pocket-book. “Exactly what I wanted. I shall be always in her mind now. She will think of me with gratitude and respect, perhaps even with a tenderer feeling. Since she insists on it, I shall not refuse these accounts of her stewardship which she proposes to render. They will get us into regular correspondence, put us on a friendly footing, and, what is still better, we shall meet. . . . No, I don’t think I am acting the hypocrite. I intended to bestow something in charity—it is only right I should—and if I can kill two birds with one stone, so much the better.

All is fair in love and war. And I mean her nothing but good. A nice letter"—reading it again—"a very nice letter, and well put. No gushing nonsense or conventional cant about it, and though womanly and modest, it shows decision of character. Clearly a woman who knows her own mind."

Two days later, Brandon chartered a hansom with a blood mare, and had himself driven to Hampstead. He never rode in an omnibus and detested the underground railway, and as he never gave less than double fare, he could always secure the best of cabs and the swiftest of horses.

Greatly to his disappointment the bird was flown.

"Just fancy!" said Mrs. Somers, with some heat. "My sister went away this morning, and she had promised to stay until the middle of next week. She so seldom pays us a visit now, poor girl."

"Why 'poor girl'?"

"Did I say 'poor girl'? I really don't know why. All the same, she is to be pitied, you know. She has no proper home; though, of course, she might have if she chose. She might make our house her home. I have pressed her many and many a time, but she won't. I never did know a more obstinate young woman. And she has fads about the poor, and goes amongst them for days together. I tell her she will catch something infectious; but it is no use, she goes her own way. I think she is on one of her expeditions now. She said she had received letters which compelled her to shorten her visit, that there were matters which required her immediate attention—what, I have no idea—only I am sure they are not personal or family matters."

From these somewhat disjointed remarks, George learned, or rather inferred, two things—that Evelyn had been true to her promise to keep his secret, and that she had already begun the distribution of his gift. This pleased but did not surprise him. He had given her credit for promptitude and faithfulness, and she was proving herself prompt and faithful.

“She is amongst the Crusaders,” he thought. “I wonder where. If I could only find out and come across her as by accident!”

And then he remembered Harold Minton, whom, since seeing Evelyn, he had almost forgotten; and “poor Mary” had been in his mind hardly at all. His remissness annoyed him. “I shall begin to think soon that I am in love,” he said to himself, and went straight from Hampstead to Brick Street, though it was rather a long way to “cab.”

“I thought I was never going to see you again,” said his sister, with one of her half-sad, half-sarcastic smiles. “No news, of course.”

“Not yet. It is almost too soon to expect any, don’t you think? Still, time is getting on, and to-morrow I shall see both the Crusaders and the police. By this time——”

“You are very kind, George, but it is no use; I shall never see him again.”

“Nonsense! You are sure to see him again. He may turn up at any moment.”

“It is possible; anything is possible. But it is best to expect nothing; then one is sure not to be disappointed. Have you been to Fairmead since?”

“No. I have been making a few calls in town, and engaged with business matters.”

"What will the Peters say?"

"I don't know. But I never undertook to stay with them altogether. However, I must either write or go back before very long, that is quite clear."

"Better go back. You can run up again any time, you know, and we cannot keep my poor boy's disappearance secret much longer. If you don't tell them somebody else will."

"Well, if we hear nothing of him the next few days, I shall return to Fairmead. But I mean to have a good hunt for him first."

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### WHAT CAN IT BE?

EARLY on the following day, Brandon started on his proposed hunt, quite as much after Evelyn as after his brother-in-law; and he had really more hope of meeting the one than of finding the other. He did not expect to hear anything at Scotland yard, and he was not disappointed. The same at the headquarters of the Crusading Army. The commandant whom George first saw had been "detailed for duty in the field," which meant that he was away on a preaching tour. His successor, who bore the title of "Major," did not impress George favourably. His voice was sepulchral; his finger nails were in mourning; he did not seem to possess a pocket handkerchief, and sniffed continually, a habit to which Brandon had a decided objection. The major was much less sanguine about finding Minton than his predecessor had been.

"You must remember," he said, "that our soldiers have not the same power as the police. If any of them did chance to see anybody that looked like Mr. Minton, they would have no power to detain him, and before you could be communicated with they would almost certainly have lost him."

"Not if they kept him in sight, and that should not be very difficult. I would make it worth their while. However, don't you think I had better see some of them and explain the matter myself? There is all the difference in the world between a first-hand description and a second."

"Perhaps it would," answered the major, reflectively rubbing his nose with the sleeve of his coat. "Perhaps it would. Where would you like to begin?"

"Where you advise."

"Suppose you begin with our Burglars' Home, then."

"Burglars' Home! What's that?"

"A home where we receive discharged prisoners—burglars, ex-convicts, and such like, who have been picked up by our Prison Gate Brigade, or have come to the penitent form at our meetings, and mean to lead a better life. We find them food, shelter, and work, till such time as they can shift for themselves. We give the preference to those who are saved."

"To those who profess to be saved! Very good of you I am sure. And so you think I might as well begin by making my inquiries there. Good! Tell me where it is, and give me some sort of credentials, and I will go at once."

"You don't want credentials. You need only say you come from me and you will receive every attention. Here is the address."

An hour later, George's hansom pulled up before a large, gloomy-looking house in the region of Hackney. Above the door was a large black sign-board, inscribed with this legend :—

THE CRUSADING ARMY.

BURGLARS' HOME.

"This looks like it, I think, sir," said the driver, through the hole in the top of his cab.

"Very," answered George, as he stepped out.

"Shall I wait?"

"By all means ; I shall only be a few minutes."

To inquire at this place seemed to be altogether a work of supererogation. However, having come on purpose, he went up to the door and pulled the bell.

His ring was answered by a stout, buxom woman, with a ruddy countenance and a pleasant smile. George asked if he could see the manager, whereupon a big, square shouldered fellow, whose rolled-up shirt sleeves displayed a pair of muscular arms, stepped forward and said that he was the man. And he looked a man, every inch of him—strong all over, from his great stalwart limbs to his resolute and powerful, yet genial face.

Brandon explained his business.

"I don't see how I can help you," said the manager, frankly. "And to tell the truth, I don't know why Major Hucklebery sent you here. I hardly ever go out, except with some of my people, and they are not likely to know

anything of your friend—unless they made his acquaintance in prison.”

“They are all ex-prisoners, then?”

“Every man in the house, except myself—and we have a full score—is a discharged prisoner.”

“Are they all at work?”

“Come along, and see for yourself.”

The Burglars’ Home was peopled with all sorts and conditions of men—grey-beards and youths, joiners, shoemakers, tailors and the like; those who could do nothing better were cutting firewood; some were digging in the garden. Most of them were quiet, decent-looking fellows, as unlike the conventional housebreaker and thief as well could be; a few, however, had the heavy jowl and hang-dog air which proclaimed them the malefactors they undoubtedly had been and would almost certainly remain.

“Do you ever have any who shirk their work?” asked George.

“Lots, and I show them to the door, double quick. ‘Those who work not, neither shall they eat.’”

“And if they resist?”

“They never try that on with me,” laughed the manager, with a glance at his broad chest and brawny arms. “I stand no nonsense.”

“I suppose you have relapses?”

“A great many. On the other hand, some persevere nobly, and are staunch to the end. The biggest offenders often make the best men. You remember that shoemaker I spoke to?”

“A slightly-built man with sandy hair?”

"Yes. Well, that man has cracked more cribs than you and me have cracked nuts. Yet he has been here nearly four years and never broken down once. Neither drinks nor smokes, and he has married a wife. He is going to be set up in a shop of his own, thanks to the kindness of a good friend. But there's some as are quite past saving, either by the power of religion or anything else. The only place for them is prison, and they should never be let outside. Have a cup of tea with me and my wife?"—pointing to a little parlour where the table was set for tea.

"With pleasure," said George.

"I am a reformed character myself," continued the manager. "Not as I was ever a thief. But I've been as bad; I've been a drunkard. And I did drink, too; I was sometimes hardly ever sober for months on end. And now—talk of longing for it! Why, I cannot bear the smell. I hate the very sight of a public-house, and never pass one without holding my nose. Take a chair, won't you? I am a cabinet-maker by trade, and can make my three guineas a week. I'm not doing as well as that now, though, and I left a good place to come here. But I owe a good deal to the Crusaders. 'Twas at one of their meetings as I got saved, both body and soul, for I was in a weary way. We had just been sold up—our Polly and me—and we had hardly a shoe to our feet. I owe them a great deal, and I thought this was a good work, helping poor fellows to get nearer Heaven, or, as I should say, a bit further from hell."

"You like your occupation, then?"

"I do. It is hard work, and I have had some bitter disappointments. But it is not all labour in vain, thank God!"

"A good fellow this ; I wonder if I could help him in any way," thought George.

"Do you happen to have heard," he asked, as the manager's wife handed him a cup of tea, "do you happen to have heard of a lady who takes a great interest in the work of the Crusading Army, a lady of the name of Waters—Miss Waters?"

"Miss Waters ! The gentleman asks if we know Miss Waters, Polly. Why, she was here only yesterday. It is her as is going to set up Sherbeck, the shoemaker, you know, in a shop. It will be a matter of thirty or forty pounds one way and another. She says a friend has placed the money at her disposal. God bless him, whoever he is ! And she is going to send another man, a young 'un—he has only been convicted once—out to Australia. He won't get the past thrown into his teeth there, and out of the country he'll do well. Yes, sir, we know Miss Waters. She's a good woman ; knows what she is about, too ; isn't satisfied with just giving money like some folk—the easiest thing in the world for them as has it—but looks after things herself."

George smiled. He freely forgave the manager's unconscious censure of himself, in consideration of his previous benediction and his frank praise of Evelyn.

"Do you know where Miss Waters is now?" he asked.

"I am not sure," was the reply, "but I daresay you will see her or hear something of her at the Hall."

"What hall?"

"The Crusaders' Hall. It is close to. Anybody will tell you."

"I have a hansom at the door. I can drive."

"Wait a minute. Two of our soldiers have just come in. They will take you there and show you round. There is a near cut. It is a mile to ride, not more than half-a-mile to walk."

George thought he was equal to the exertion of footing it half-a-mile, so, after shaking hands with the manager and his wife, he dismissed the hansom, and set out with the two soldiers, whose manner and remarks indicated that they had some idea of attempting his conversion. They led him into a bye street, traversed several alleys, and then struck into another bye street. As they neared a group of rough-looking men, who had just come out of a public house and seemed the worse for drink, a fellow with a patch on one eye and a fur cap half over the other, laid his dirty paws on a decent-looking girl who was passing by, twisted her round and nearly threw her down.

The girl screamed, and the loafers laughed.

"Let the child alone!" said Brandon, sternly.

"What is it to you? I didn't touch you, guv'nor, did I?" growled the rough, as he let the girl go.

"You had better not. If you did, you would very soon find yourself where you nearly threw that poor child—in the gutter."

"Knock me into the gutter, would you? Well, do it, then—just to oblige me and these other gents,"—winking at his companions—"to show us how it's done, you know," leering insolently at George, and puffing a cloud of tobacco smoke into his face.

George did it.

Then the remainder of the gang went for him with a rush,

He was a powerful man, with great length of arm, and a born fighter. His blood was up, too. Yet the odds against him were heavy, and he called on the Crusaders for help. But one of the "soldiers" had incontinently bolted, and the other stood in an attitude of prayer—at a safe distance.

Left thus to his own unaided resources, George knocked three of his assailants down, one after the other, placed his back against the nearest wall, and calling them "a pack of cowardly hounds," bade them come on if they dared.

The ragamuffins did not seem particularly eager to accept the challenge, yet, after picking themselves up and gathering themselves together, they decided to have another try.

Had they been country yokels, George would have stood a very poor chance. But they were seedy, short-winded Londoners, and so long as he could keep them at arm's length he was in no great danger. Two—having had unpleasant experience of his prowess, and not liking to stand square up to him—came on "heads down," as if they meant to ram them into the pit of his stomach. George gave the first a kick in the mouth that knocked him over and several of his teeth down his throat. The second he gave a crack on the nape of the neck, which sent him flat on his nose.

"No more from yours truly," said the villain, as he scrambled to his feet with his head askew. "Those arms are like sledge-hammers. Another knock like that, and I should walk one way and look another all my days."

Meanwhile, two of the others, making each a flank movement from opposite directions, seized the one a leg, the other an arm, and held on like bulldogs. While George was

thus "at vantage ta'en," a third blackguard, who had hitherto held himself in reserve, made a bold dash in front, hit Brandon on the face, knocked his hat off, tore open his waistcoat, and was laying violent hands on the historic chain, when the victim, by a dexterous movement of his disengaged knee, hit his man in the wind, and placed him temporarily *hors de combat*.

What would have been the issue had the battle been fought out to the bitter end it is impossible to say, for at the critical moment, the missing Crusader, reinforced by two policemen, rounded the corner of the street at a run; whereupon the ruffianly gang made off as fast as if their master, the devil, had been after them—all save the rascal whom the blow in the stomach and left gasping on the pavement.

"Here's one, at any rate," exclaimed the first constable, seizing the prostrate man by the scruff of the neck and lifting him on his legs. "No chance of catching the others, I fear. They are out of sight already."

"So much the better," said George, smoothing his rumpled hat. "Let this rascal go, too. If you don't I shall have to appear as a witness, and that would be a bore. He has been sufficiently punished already."

The policeman expostulated, but half-a-crown shut his mouth and overcame his scruples; he relaxed his grasp, and the fellow, groaning and bent half-double, staggered away.

"If you two had not left me in the lurch," said George to the Crusaders, "this would not have happened, and I should not have had a good hat spoiled, and nearly all the buttons torn off my waistcoat."

"I prayed," pleaded the one who had kept at a safe distance, "and 'the prayer of the righteous man availeth much.'"

"That is why your prayers availed so little, I suppose."

"It is our duty to turn the cheek to the smiter—to submit to violence, but not to inflict it," added the other. "I ran for the police."

"So, though you will not resist violence in person, you have no objection to do it by deputy. This is a doctrine I don't quite understand, and this is the first time I have heard it suggested that it is no part of a Christian man's duty to protect the weak. But there is a time for everything, and this is no time for argument. Where can I go to repair damages?"

"To the Hall," answered one of the Crusaders. "It is hard by, and you can have every convenience."

"Thanks ; be good enough to lead on."

In a few minutes they were before the Crusaders' Hall, a building of vast proportions and unspeakable ugliness. Its aspect was both irritating and depressing, and Mr. Ruskin would have pronounced it even more hideous and damnable than a Baptist chapel built of iron and deeply in debt.

The interior of the hall looked like a Brobdiagnian circus, and was used as a chapel. The right and left wings of the basement were occupied by officers, of the two sexes respectively, and by neophytes in training. All the arrangements were neat and orderly, and George saw at a glance that discipline was as strictly maintained in this ghostly barracks as in an encampment of worldly warriors.

After washing his hands, and having his clothes brushed, he was introduced to a matronly, middle-aged woman, who made a speciality of doctoring damaged Crusaders. She plastered his face, which had got a little cut in the scrimmage, mended his waistcoat, and otherwise set him to rights.

"I am afraid this eye will be a little discoloured," she said. "The under lid is swollen already."

"Hang it, I hope not!" returned George, with a look of alarm. "A black eye looks so blackguardly. I would rather have a clean sabre cut, any day."

"Bless the man! What is he thinking about? Why, our soldiers are always getting black eyes, and they make very light of them. You know Miss Waters, don't you? Sister Evelyn we call her."

George admitted that he did know Miss Waters—slightly.

"Slightly! Why, I thought from what the soldiers said, that you was a relative, or something of that sort! Anyhow, I have sent for her. I hope you won't take it amiss."

"Not at all; not in the least."

"What am I saying? I mean I hope she won't take it amiss."

"That is a very different matter. I am afraid she will."

"I don't think so. She is so very kind. But here she is to answer for herself."

"You here, Mr. Brandon!" exclaimed Miss Waters. "I thought, from what the cadet said, that it was Colonel Somerset who had sent for me."

"I hope you don't deem me guilty of such an imper-

tinence. I had no idea of such a thing," rejoined George, earnestly. "But my appearance here requires explanation and——"

"You are hurt. Has something happened?" interposed Evelyn, with an anxious glance at his face.

"Something has happened," answered the matron. "This gentleman—I don't know his name—has been defending some of our soldiers from a mob of roughs, and got rather knocked about. It was I who sent for you. I understood he was a relation or a great friend. But I am wanted elsewhere. If you will kindly excuse me, I will leave you to yourselves a few minutes."

"I hope you are not much hurt, Mr. Brandon," said Evelyn, softly. "It was very good of you to stand up so bravely for our poor soldiers."

"My hurts are a mere nothing. I am a little bruised, that is all. As for these soldiers, as they call themselves, I don't admire them much. I am afraid they are poltroons." And then he told her about his search for Minton, his call at the Burglars' Home, and what had befallen him thereafter.

"You are quite right," she said, thoughtfully; "the two soldiers did not act a very noble part. In my opinion, your conduct was much more Christian-like than theirs. You did well to take the part of that poor girl. I thank you for it."

"I am glad to have your approval, Miss Waters. But why should you thank me?"

"Because"—warmly—"the thanks of every woman are due to the man who stands up for the weak, especially the weak of her own sex. Yes, I thank you heartily, Mr Brandon. I am glad Mrs. Tomkins sent for me. I should

have been sorry for you to go away without my seeing you. I am here just now as—what shall I say?—the steward of your bounty.”

“It is very good of you to give yourself so much trouble.”

“Say, rather, it is good of you to give so much money. I have spent some of it already.”

“I am glad to hear you say so. The faster you spend it the better I shall be pleased.”

“Oh, I must not spend it too fast. Money is too valuable a commodity to be scattered broadcast. This is a good place for the purpose. The Crusaders are by no means perfect, but the officers are honest and God-fearing men. They come much in contact with the poor, and I can get at the facts of a case better through them than any other agency I know of. But I also look into matters myself. I have several cases under investigation at present. After next week, however, I shall have to suspend operations for about a fortnight.”

“You are going to stay with some friends, you were saying.”

“Yes, with the Pembertons. Lucy Pemberton is an old schoolfellow of mine, and a very dear friend. They have had trouble lately, and are not so well off as they used to be, which makes it all the more imperative that I should pay them any little attention in my power.”

“And for your own sake, too, you should make this visit. A rest will do you good.”

“I don’t know,” returned Evelyn, with something like a sigh; “I am always the most contented when the most occupied. A tranquil, easy, flowing life suits some people,

but I must have work to do—actual work, or else—— I shall have my first week's account ready in a few days,"—abruptly—"where shall I send it? to the Saunterers' Club?"

"If you please. But pray do not trouble about an account. I want none. I trust you implicitly."

"But I want to give you an account—must do, in fact, if only for my own satisfaction. And when you get it, Mr. Brandon, do me the favour to look it carefully over and make any observations and ask any questions that may occur to you. A happy suggestion is often worth more than money. And now,"—giving him her hand—"I am afraid I must say 'good-bye.' Mrs. Tomkins will be back presently, and there is no drawing-room here to which I can invite you."

And so they parted.

"I wonder what it can be," George asked himself, as he went out to look for the indispensable hansom. "It is as I thought at first; she has seen trouble—her sister said so in fact—and it strikes me she has something on her mind even yet. Well, every family has its skeleton. And now I think of it, Somers was very reticent about the Waters's. I wish I could console her, dear soul—and I will."

The idea more than once occurred to him that the trouble he suspected might be personal to herself and a trouble of the heart. But he refused to listen to any such unpalatable suggestion, even from his own mind, in every instance peremptorily dismissing it as impossible.

## CHAPTER XV

## BRANDYWINE AND COCK ROBIN.

WHEN George looked into the glass on the following morning, he found that his eye, albeit not very deeply in mourning, was swollen and discoloured, and in order to avoid inconvenient inquiries on the part of his brother and Rufine, he went down to Brighton for a few days. His first proceeding on his return was to call at the office of Brandon, Bully and Loot.

"Where on earth have you been?" asked Peter. "Rufine and the girls are quite put about. We were beginning to think you were either lost in London, or that the English climate had frightened you back to Bombay, and that you were gone without so much as saying 'good-bye.'"

"No, no; you could not think that. It is somebody else who is lost," said George; and then he told his brother about Minton's disappearance.

"I am not at all surprised," returned Peter, drily. "It would be a good thing if he never came back. But that is too much to hope for, I fear. He is sure to turn up again. Let Mary shut up her house and come to us."

But Mary—whom George went afterwards to see—refused the invitation point blank.

"Peter is no friend of mine," she said, bitterly. "He led my poor boy into temptation. But for him, Harold would be with me now. I don't think I shall ever set my foot in Peter Brandon's house again."

Before George left the office, he executed the will which had been prepared for him by his brother.

"It is rather absurd my making a will," was his mental comment on the transaction, "nor is this quite the sort of will I ought to make. However, it does not much matter. If I refuse, Peter might suspect something; and marriage will cancel it, and when I am married I shall make another, and a very different one."

Rufine received him with honeyed words and reproachful eyes, as if, though she had sorrowed for his absence, she was more than consoled by his return.

"Back at last!" she exclaimed. "We have feared all sorts of things for you. Why didn't you write? I shall never forgive this unhappy Harold for keeping you so long from us. What a dreadful man he is! And your poor sister, how she must suffer! I am so sorry, I cannot tell you. I wonder if she would like me to call upon her. My faith, if I had such a husband I would let him go, and pray *le bon Dieu* that he might never come back. But your sister is an angel—a veritable angel. I admire her with all my heart; but I could not imitate her."

Katherine and Cordelia made a demonstration of joy so frantic that George was nearly as much damaged in the encounter as he had been in his battle with the roughs.

They must return to Guildford at the end of the week, they said, and they were so glad that dear, dear Uncle George had come back before they went away. His nieces rendered him at least one service; they "uncled" him so incessantly that he became quite reconciled to the appellation.

"Do you ride—on horseback, I mean?" he asked, as they strolled about the garden, each maiden with an arm through

his, and looking up to him with laughing eyes, Rufine watching them with a smile on her face, but the demon of jealousy gnawing at her heart.

"When we have a chance," answered Katherine; "but the carriage-horses are too heavy, and the pony is not up to our weight."

"But there are horses to be hired, are there not?"

"Oh, dear, yes! Letz has some very nice ones. But there is nobody to go out with us, except when Peter or Ned is here, and we are so seldom all together now," sighing.

"Never mind that. I am going to buy a horse or two for myself, and we will have at least one ride before you leave—if I can arrange it, to-morrow afternoon."

"Dear, dear Uncle George, how too, too awfully good you are!" and the young women, jumping up as if they were playing at snatch apple, gave him between them a dozen well-planted kisses without making a single bad shot.

"Letz! Letz!" said George, stroking back his moustaches. "Haven't I heard something about Letz being a dealer in horses?"

"Oh, yes! He both sells horses and lets them out."

"I'll go and see him at once. His place is not far off, is it?"

"Not more than a mile-and-a-half, if you take the path across the common. It is just at the top of the hill. You cannot miss it; there is a big sign over the gate."

"A mile-and-a-half!"—dubiously—"Rather a long walk; still, I think one might do it, you know."

"Some people might, but I don't think I would try if I were you, Uncle George," said Cordelia, with mock gravity.

“Why?”

“You are such a weak little man. A walk of two thousand six hundred and forty yards might injure your health. You had better let me order the carriage.”

“What a clever girl you are!” laughed George. “You actually know how many yards there are in a mile-and-a-half. I don’t think I am a weak little man, but walking is certainly not my strong point. However, I daresay I shall be able to get as far as these stables by my own unaided exertions. If I do not feel equal to the walk back I must hire one of Mr. Letz’s cabs. You may be sure I shall not over exert myself.”

George found the horse dealer at home—a tall, leggy man, with a big, swarthy face, broken teeth, shrewd eyes and a stubby beard. He was very affable and accommodating, declared he could find the young ladies exactly what they wanted, and sell Mr. Brandon a couple of “hosses” fit to carry him to any ’ounds in England.

“Well, I’m a willing buyer, Mr. Letz, and if you treat me well I may not improbably buy two or three more.”

“It would not be worth my while to treat you or any other gentleman otherwise, Mr. Brandon,” answered the dealer with some heat. “I’m well known hereabouts, sir. I began life in this parish as a donkey boy, and now I’ve fifteen freehold houses, seventeen hosses at this yard and fourteen at another. I hosses the fire engine and the parish hearse, and pays thirty pounds a week in wages, to say nothing of rent and grub. I never borrowed a penny in my life, nor yet accepted a bill, and I owe nothing to no man, except for ’ay and oats, and them I settle every month.”

"I am sorry if I hurt your feelings, Mr. Letz. You are an admirable example of the *mens conscia recti*."

"Who's he, sir? A friend of yourn or a hoss? I don't know as I ever heard on him before. Bring out Cock Robin, Bill! Here's a hoss as I can sell you cheap, Mr. Brandon. I only ask forty pun, and you couldn't be better carried if you gave three hundred. But I don't warrant him sound."

"Why, what is the matter? Oh, I see, that bony excrescence on the shank bone."

"That's it, sir; but I call it a lump. It comes through being staked in hunting. It's a heyesore, I know, but no real detriment, if you ride him with a boot. He carried me all last season, and I reckon you and me is about the same weight. He can take anything, either at a stand or flying, and he never tires or makes a mistake. Look at his loins. You have something both behind you and before you in that hoss, sir. And he can move, too. Trot him over the stones, Bill. If you buy Cock Robin, Mr. Brandon, you'll never be better mounted as long as you live, not if you live a hundred years. Bring out Brandywine, you there. He's a rare good sort, he is, sir; a grand hoss all over. Just bought him from a farmer as rode him a few times to 'ounds last season. I've seen him go over some rasping places. Goes like a bullet, he does. Yes, he is rather rough yet. I shouldn't show him by good rights. But I want you to have something as will do us both credit. He'll clip a blood hoss, he will, sir. Not as I advise you to clip him. He's shedding his old coat, and in a month's time he'll be as handsome as paint. I can take a hundred guineas for

that hoss, sir, and if you consider as he's up to fourteen stone, and only six years old, he's dirt cheap at the money."

"I don't want cheap horses; I want good ones," said George. Cock Robin is decidedly the best, and if it was not for that lump——"

"Well, if you don't like the lump don't take the hoss. I cannot separate 'em; I wish I could. I never press a gentleman to take a hoss as he does not fancy. But before you decide just throw your leg over him. I'll have both hosses saddled, and go with you into the forest, and you can see what sort of performers they are. There's a bruck, and there's hurdles, and as nice a bit of galloping ground as you could wish for. Cock Robin is very high-spirited, and if you more than just touches him with the spur when he's fresh, he just goes mad. You might as well try to stop a steam engine."

The horses fully justified the character given them by their owner. Cock Robin "did" the brook and "flew" the hurdles to admiration, and George, who was himself in high spirits, enjoyed the gallop as keenly as if he had been twenty years younger."

"It's a'most as good as hunting," said Letz, as they rode back. "I wish it was the season again."

"You like hunting, then?"

"I do that. I allus look on summer as a sort of lost time. But farmers must have a chance to get in their crops, and hares and foxes to breed. If there was hunting all the year round there would soon be nothing left to hunt. A rare country for foxes, this, sir; there's three litters in

them there spinneys down in the hollow. If you go out with us next season you'll see plenty of sport."

George brought both Brandywine and Cock Robin, and arranged for Mr. Letz to keep them for him at livery. It was further arranged that a groom should call at The Cottage for his orders every morning, and that Cock Robin and a couple of hacks with side-saddles, should be sent there on the following afternoon.

"We'll ride that way round now, if you like," proposed the dealer. "I can leave you there, and lead Cock Robin home. It will save you the walk, and it's a safe rule never to go on shank's pony when you can ride a good hoss, drink water when you can get wine, or kiss the maid when you can kiss the mistress."

"I am quite of your opinion, Mr. Letz; at any rate as touching the superiority of a good horse to shank's pony. I am not quite so sure, though, about the invariable superiority of mistresses to maids, and wine to water."

As George was dismounting at the lodge gates, he inquired whether Brandywine would carry a lady.

"Undoubtedly, if the lady can stick on," answered the dealer, "but he doesn't like a side-saddle, and the flutter of a riding habit makes him wildish. But if your missus is a good horsewoman——"

"You are mistaken," laughed George, "I don't own a 'missus.'"

"You are lucky. And I would not begin if I was you. They're allus a hindrance to hunting, missuses is—unless they take to it themselves, and then they cost a sight o' money, and wants a deal o' looking arter when 'ounds is

running. If they falls at a fence you're a'most bound to stop and help 'em up again."

The inquiry was made with special reference to Rufine, for it had just occurred to George that if he did not invite her to join the riding party she might not improbably take offence. But equestrianism, he found, was not among her accomplishments. Though her dear father, she said, had kept several horses, he did not think it was *comme il faut* for a *jeune fille* to *promener à cheval*, and so, unfortunately for her, she had never been taught to ride.

"But I can drive," she said, "and if you will let me, I will go with you a little way in my pony cart, and take dear little George and the nurse."

Of course, Big George said he should be delighted, but a slight, almost imperceptible, lifting of Cordelia's eyebrows, and the glance she gave her sister, showed that his nieces viewed with the reverse of pleasure the prospect of their stepmother's company. And it did prove rather a bore, for she kept her brother-in-law by her side nearly all the time, and prevented them from having the gallop—with a bit of jumping thrown in—for which they were longing. George himself was also rather annoyed, both on this ground and because he wanted to find out from his nieces—who knew every inch of the forest—the nearest way to Beech Hall, and, if possible, something about the Pembertons, without making direct inquiry or letting his motive be suspected. The next time they had a ride—a few days later—they were more fortunate. Little George had coughed once or twice during the previous night, and as his mother would neither take the child out nor leave him with the nurse,

they could go their own way, and naturally took to the forest, for as Katherine observed, "Who would ride on the hard high-road when they could canter over soft, green turf!"

George, profoundly ignorant of the topography of the district and the dwellers therein, showed a laudable desire to increase his knowledge, never passing a decent-looking house without asking the name of it and who lived therein. After they had ridden an hour or more—the line they followed being devious—his perseverance was rewarded by learning that a picturesque cottage, embowered in trees and surrounded by an old-fashioned garden, was Beech Hall. The garden sloped down to the road, from which it was fenced by a tall hedge of hornbeam. The house, which stood on the top of a gentle slope, was built of oaken boards painted white, and roofed with tiles, and the great brick chimney stacks, with their red pots, might be seen over the tree tops a mile away. One end of the house was covered with ivy; a climbing rose-tree hung over the porch and joined hands with the westeria, whose delicate blue flower had just succeeded the faded beauty of the japonical, which formed a verdant setting for the quaint old windows. A little to the left were farm buildings, and the park-like meadows at the back were hemmed in by a belt of beeches, whose massive stems and wealth of foliage showed that when the century was young they were old.

"A nice old place," observed George, with well-affected indifference. "Who lives there?"

"It was once occupied by somebody of importance," said Cordelia, "a former ranger of the forest, I think. But

that was long ago. It is now a better sort of farmhouse, and the tenants are called——”

“Pemberton,” suggested Katherine.

“Yes, Pemberton. I believe Mr. Pemberton was a mine owner or railway contractor, or something of the sort, and made a large fortune. Then he lost it pretty nearly all and took this farm, and settled here with the remnant. At least that is what we have heard. I never saw him or Mrs. Pemberton, but we once met Miss Pemberton——”

“At a Buttercup ball,” put in the other.

“Yes, at a Buttercup ball. Peter danced with her. She is very nice. I rather think there are sons, but I know nothing about them.”

George marked the place well. He had a feeling that it would somehow or other be mixed up with his own destiny. Evelyn was to be there in a few days, and before she went away he fully intended to ask her to be his wife. He could no longer disguise from himself that he loved her, even with a love as great as that which Jack Forster had once borne for Lillian Waters. And love, as it generally does, was “sicklying o’er the native hue of resolution with the pale cast of thought.” Albeit, as confident as ever that she would accept him, he was beginning to have misgivings—to be haunted with the shadow of a fear, a vague apprehension that there might be obstacles in the way which he had not hitherto anticipated, and the nature of which he was unable to determine. There was something about Evelyn’s past which he had still to learn—what could it be? Repress and stifle the foreboding as he would, the possibility that something unpleasant might be in store recurred to him

again and again, and though he did not let it weaken his resolve, he could not hinder it from weighing on his mind. Not being quite blind, moreover, he well knew that the attentions he received from his kinsfolk at Fairmead were due less to his own merits than to a lively sense of favours to come, and that they were likely to regard his marriage with Evelyn, or any other woman, as a proceeding likely to interfere with the fruition of their hopes. Peter had been very astute about the will, but George would have been dense indeed had he not divined his brother's motives; and although he had not adopted his sister's estimate of Rufine's character—still liked her, in fact—he could not flatter himself that she felt for him all that her manner implied. He had a strong impression that she would not want him to marry, and, albeit fully resolved to go his own way, regardless of her or any other body's likes or dislikes, he detested opposition and hated worry, and was especially desirous that Evelyn should be well received by his family. For these reasons he was determined to make no sign, utter no word, or do anything whatever which might betray his designs, until their marriage should be decided and the day fixed. Perhaps there was another reason unconfessed to himself. He had been so long impervious to love that he may have been reluctant openly to admit, any sooner than need be, that he had fallen victim to the rosy god.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### PETER WANTS TO BORROW.

THE brothers are sauntering about the garden at Fairmead—pacing to and fro near a hedge of laurels that divides the

flower beds from the shrubbery. Katherine and Cordelia having returned to Guildford, the family is reduced to its normal dimensions. George has reason to believe that Evelyn is at Beech Hall, and he means to call there on the following day. He has an excellent excuse ready to his hand, in the report of her first week's operations as "almoner of his bounty"—her own expression. In connection therewith several suggestions have occurred to him, which he considers it his duty to submit to her; and matters of business are so much more easily discussed in a personal interview than by correspondence, that the Pembertons—and herself—will no doubt regard his call as a very natural proceeding and the right thing for him to do.

"I am sorry the girls are gone; they are very nice company," says Peter, who, George thinks, has looked rather harassed the last day or two.

"Very," returns George, absently. "He is thinking about the morrow."

"They are awfully fond of you. When you stayed away so long they quite pined. I almost think they are fonder of you than they are of me. And no wonder, you have been so very kind to them."

"And haven't you been kind to them?"

"Yes, of course. At any rate, I hope so. But I did not mean in that sense, you know; I meant relatively," adds Peter, hastily, and with an uncomfortable feeling that in buttering up George he has rather discredited himself. "I like girls better than boys."

"I'm surprised at that. I thought it was the other way about."

"I don't mean sentimentally—that is as may be. I mean practically. Girls stop at home and help in the house. They can make and mend their own clothes, don't stop out o' nights, or want setting up in business. At a moderate computation, it costs five times as much to bring up a boy as a girl, and boys are ten times the trouble. You never know when you've done with them. Take Peter, for instance ; he spends four hundred a year and does not earn a fourth of it. Another instance ; there's Ned."

"Nothing wrong with him, I hope. Ned is a favourite of mine. A fine young fellow, I call him."

"So do I. Only if he had been born a girl instead of a boy I should not have to find ten thousand pounds to start him in business."

"All the same, it's a father's duty, and it should be his pleasure, to provide for his children."

"Well, I have provided for mine, and handsomely. Done more than I ought, in fact. As touching Ned, I have undertaken more than I can well perform. I have paid one five thousand, and should pay a second instalment of the same amount very shortly, and, 'pon my word, I don't know where the money is to come from."

"Oh," says George. He begins to see which way the wind is blowing.

"Ned will be here next week, and I fear I shall have to tell him that the arrangement with Meyer and Falkner cannot be carried out—unless you will help me, George. I have a lot of money locked up in shares, land, loans and what not, just now, or I should not need to ask you, and if it was for a merely business purpose, I would not think of

asking you. I shall not want the money long—only a few months.”

The request greatly surprised George ; he had thought Peter was in easy circumstances and could command an almost unlimited amount of capital, and he did not want to lend him money. He had no great confidence in his brother's probity ; he felt pretty certain that if Peter chose he could easily raise this five thousand pounds in the city, and if he lent it to him it would be practically used for business purposes—an investment or a speculation. It might even turn out to be a gift, for if Peter made difficulties about repayment, how could he compel him ? And George, though freehanded, was business-like. If he had not been, he would have wanted the means wherewith to be freehanded. When he gave, he liked to give with his eyes open, and he had no idea of making his brother a present of five thousand pounds. This was the second attack the elder had made on his purse, and George could not forget that Peter had robbed him of a great part of his inheritance. All the same, he felt that he would like to help his nephew—if it were really a question of helping him. So, instead of refusing, he temporised.

“You say Ned will be here in a few days,” he said ; “I will talk to him and see what I can do. But I promise nothing. I am not at all sure that I can let you have this money.”

“As you please,” returned Peter, sullenly. “As you please, only don't say anything of this to Rufine. The less women know about money matters, the better for their husband's peace of mind and their own.”

"I don't think I should have mentioned it to her in any case ; and as you make a point of it, I shall, of course, not," said George, coldly.

Peter little knew, poor man, that while they were talking, his wife had passed them unperceived, and was just then sitting on a rustic bench on the other side of the laurel hedge.

"*Sacré nom de Dieu !*" she hissed, as the two men moved away. "My husband gives all that he has to those others, and there will be nothing left for my poor little boy. And Peter, whom I thought so rich, is poor ; he wants money. How I have deceived myself of that man ! I thought he told me everything."

Mrs. Brandon was probably not the first woman whose husband deceived her by false pretences or evasive answers to inconvenient questions. But in concluding that he was poor, she deceived herself. He was only "too extended," as the phrase goes, and to relieve a temporary stress in his finances had hit upon the brilliant idea of borrowing five thousand pounds from George, ostensibly for his son, and paying Meyer and Falkner by an acceptance at three or four months ; a combination which would both be less costly and more convenient than raising money in the city, or disposing of shares in a dull market. But Rufine not being aware of this, it was only natural that she should make a wrong deduction and act according to her lights.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## WILD ROSES.

As George Brandon neared Wild Roses, as the bit of forest round Beech Hall was generally called, he felt as he had hardly ever felt before, even when the bullets were whistling round his head and comrades falling by his side—positively and painfully nervous; and when the red chimneys of the farmhouse loomed in sight, he reined Cock Robin in, and rode the rest of the way at a slow walk, thinking deeply the while. Though in resolve as strong as ever, his confidence waned as the critical moment approached. Vague fears still haunted him. Success seemed less certain than he had once deemed it, and his heart was set on having Evelyn; love took all the firmer hold of him that it had been so long in coming; and, rightly or wrongly, he believed that on the issue depended the happiness of his life—perhaps wrongly, for a sorrow that time and occupation are unable to heal must be deep indeed. But when a man loves for the first time at five-and-thirty, he is much more likely to take a disappointment ill than when his years were fewer and his character was less formed. The strongest trees are those which bend the least readily to the blast. George, moreover, like all men whose wills have been hardened by success, hated to fail, and a refusal from Evelyn would hurt his pride almost as much as it would wound his spirit.

“But she shall have me. I will not be refused,” was his summing-up of the whole matter as he dismounted from his horse at the garden gate,” and though I may not put the question to-day, it shall not be long deferred.”

A tall young woman was busy among the flower beds. She wore a coloured print dress, with a pink pattern on a white ground, and a broad-brimmed straw hat. She seemed to be about the same age as Evelyn, had an oval face, with rather aquiline features, red cheeks and bright grey eyes, with arched brows well marked, a winning smile, and a mouth as sweet as one of her own rosebuds.

As Cock Robin, scenting freshly-gathered hay, uttered a joyous neigh, the lady, after a start of surprise, put down her hoe and came towards the gate.

"Miss Pemberton?" said George, interrogatively, doffing his hat.

"And you are Mr. Brandon, and you have come to see Miss Waters?"

"You might have made a worse guess," answered George, rather taken aback; "but how did you know?"

"By your chain and your beard; and as I had no reason to suppose that you had come to see any of us, I felt sure you had come to see Miss Waters."

"She is here, then?"

"Of course. How otherwise could I have had a description of your beard, and heard the story of your chain?"

Evelyn had been talking about him, then! Excellent augury. George's spirits revived on the instant, and he began to feel as confident as ever.

Miss Pemberton, after saying that they had no groom and that the men were in the field, took him to the stable, and when he had fastened Cock Robin to the pillar reins, she led the way to the house.

Evelyn was in the drawing-room, the window of which, overhung with ivy, looked towards the forest.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Brandon," she said, rising from a table at which she had been writing. "I did not think you would favour me with a visit here."

George said something about the statement he had received from her having suggested to him an idea or two which he should like to discuss with her.

"I am so glad," was her answer, "that you take so warm an interest in the work. It is only right that you should have a voice in the disposal of your money, and I am sure your suggestions will be very valuable. Don't go, Lucy! I shall be glad to have your opinion also. I have no secrets from Miss Pemberton, Mr. Brandon. As I told you, she is a very old and dear friend."

The discussion over—and George made it last as long as he could—he looked at his watch and hinted that it was about time he went.

"You will surely stay and have a cup of tea with us, Mr. Brandon!" said Lucy. "It will be ready in a few minutes. We are very humdrum and countrified, and like our friends to make themselves quite at home."

George declared that of all modern domestic institutions afternoon tea was the one in which he most delighted, and looking at his watch a second time, discovered by a remarkable coincidence he could just remain the longer time mentioned by Miss Pemberton.

In the dining-room were Mr. and Mrs. Pemberton; the former a farmer-like individual with a powerful face, a north-country accent and a strong smell of tobacco. His wife

was tall and straight, and, despite her years, still good-looking. She, too, had heard the story of the chain, evidently took a warm interest in George, questioned him closely about his life in India, made him drink many cups of tea and consume a great deal of bread and butter, crumpets, muffins, cold boiled ham and *et ceteras* ; and when he showed hesitation as to two fresh-laid eggs, seemed so much distressed that he ate them simply to oblige her, wondering the while what on earth he should do about dinner when he got back to Fairmead.

As he was on the point of leaving, he noticed that the young women, after exchanging glances, looked at him as if he were the subject of their thoughts.

"Miss Pemberton has a request to make—a favour to ask of you, I should say," observed Evelyn. "I tell her I am sure you will not take it amiss."

"It is impossible to take anything amiss that Miss Pemberton thinks fit to ask," answered George, gallantly.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Brandon," returned Lucy, with heightening colour and evident effort. "It is only this. We are rather highly rented here, and farming—well, you know what farming is—and the house is too large for us ; we have more rooms than we require, and if you should happen to know anybody in London who would like to spend a few weeks or months in the country, and near the forest, we should be very glad—very much obliged—if you would remember us. We would try to make them comfortable."

"And you would be sure to succeed," said George, warmly. "I shall certainly bear your request in mind, and

—yes—I think I may say that I can find you a lodger or two.”

“Poor girl,” he thought. “I see what the trouble is. They have a difficulty in making both ends meet, and she has all the care.”

They all thanked him, and Lucy and her father and mother pressed him to come again soon.

“Look in whenever you are passing,” said Mrs. Pemberton. “and the next time you come, spend the evening with us.”

“And tell us the story of the chain,” added Lucy. “We have heard it from Evelyn, of course; but as you were an actor in the drama, it would be much more interesting to have it from you.”

While his master was feasting, Cock Robin was fasting, for a horse cannot do much eating when his tail is where his nose should be, and his feet were no sooner on the turf than he bounded forward and made for home as fast as he could lay his legs down. George let him go, and in fifteen minutes they were in the lane that bounded Peter’s garden.

“A happy thought,” he murmured, “a very happy thought. Just the place for Mary and her children. They can spend the holidays there, and when Minton turns up he shall join them. I am not sure, though, that the Pembertons will have accommodation for so many. I must ride over again and ask them. Another happy thought!”

He was just in time to dress for dinner, but that was all; he could eat nothing. He had eaten more than enough at Wild Roses.

“You have no appetite, George,” said Mrs. Brandon,

with a look of concern. "After such a long ride—you have been out three or four hours—you should be as hungry as a wolf. I am afraid you are not well. What is the matter? Have you a headache?"

"A touch of liver, I think," answered George, catching at the excuse. "But I shall be all right in the morning."

"Yes, you do look as if your liver was slightly congested. Your face is also flushed. You require a tonic. You must let me make you a mixture that my poor dear father used to prescribe with great effect for sluggish livers. It gained him quite a reputation. He used to say that though it could not quite create a liver, it could make an old one as good as new. I will make up a bottle, and it shall be put in your room. Promise, now, that you will take some this night."

George gave the promise, and kept it by sipping half a tea spoonful, and throwing a fourth of the mixture away.

The next morning at breakfast he ate all before him, for Mrs. Pemberton's muffins and crumpets, though filling for the moment, did not last for ever.

"How you are hungry! Did I not say the truth?" exclaimed Rufine, triumphantly, "Why, you are quite another man already. That tonic, it is a marvel. It never fails. Ask Peter; he also has sometimes a liver."

"You are quite right. It is a wonderful medicine," returned George, earnestly. "It has cured me completely. You must give me the prescription, and I will send it to India. A medicine that makes an old liver as good as new is just what they want out there."

Rufine looked intensely gratified, for albeit sharp enough

in all conscience, she was vain of her skill in medicine and her knowledge of drugs, and had not the least suspicion that her brother-in-law was making her the victim of a *mauvaise plaisanterie*; for vanity blinds as surely as alcohol intoxicates.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### RUFINE SCENTS DANGER.

A DAY or two later, Brandon was once more at Wild Roses, his ostensible business being to ask Miss Pemberton whether she could find room for both his sister and her children, possibly also for her husband.

"That means two bedrooms," said Lucy, thoughtfully. "Oh, yes, we can manage that quite well, and they can have a room downstairs all to themselves. And about terms?"

"Whatever you like," interposed George, hastily. "I mean that I leave it entirely to you. What you think right, you know; and if a cheque on account for the first quarter or so would be any convenience, I should be very glad."

"You are very kind," returned Lucy, tears of gratitude beaming in her beautiful eyes. "Thank you very much. In other circumstances I should not think.

But we have had heavy losses. Last year's crops were very bad, and father and mother are getting into years."

He declined to stay. The old people were out, and Evelyn was sketching in the forest; "in a glade beyond the meadows," said Lucy, pointing to the belt of beeches behind the house. George marked the spot, but he could not very well go thither under Miss Pemberton's eyes.

"Does she sketch much?" he inquired, indifferently.

"Nearly every day. She generally goes about three and remains till tea time."

"I shall be in a nice fix if Mary refuses to come," he thought, as he rode homeward.

But though Mary hesitated, she ended—as women who hesitate generally do—by consenting.

"A beautiful place in the country! A farmhouse with such a name as Wild Roses, and the girls with me! It sounds like a fairy tale. But my poor boy! I am sure I shall never see him again; but suppose he comes here after all, and finds us gone! And what shall I do with my furniture and my house?"

"Store your furniture and give your house up. As for Harold, he will have no difficulty whatever. Leave your address with your next door neighbour and the postman. And he knows my address and Peter's. What do you say?"

"I say 'Yes.' But I cannot go immediately. There is just the off-chance—yet, no, I shall never see him again. You can tell the Pembertons that I shall be with them in a week or ten days. I hope you have not fallen in love with Miss Lucy. She seems a nice girl from what you say."

"Very. Not yet, but I almost think I could if I tried."

"For Heaven's sake, don't. At any rate, not till I have inspected her."

"And pronounced her free from vice and suitable for double harness, I suppose."

"But seriously, George, you are not thinking of——"

"What?"

"Proposing to Miss Pemberton."

"I give you my word that I have no intention of doing anything so absurd."

"What will she say when she knows?" he thought.

Mary's decision necessarily entailed another visit to Wild Roses. The news he bore ensured him a warm welcome; the Pembertons were almost painfully grateful, and Evelyn, though she said nothing, was obviously much pleased. George stayed several hours, walked with Lucy and Evelyn in the forest, told once more the story of the chain, and had another big tea. As he was about to mount his horse, he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten something, and taking a letter from his pocket, handed it to Miss Pemberton and rode off.

The letter contained a cheque for fifty pounds, and a politely worded request that Miss Pemberton would do him the favour to accept it "on account of Mrs. Minton's entertainment."

"Fifty pounds! Fifty pounds!" exclaimed Lucy, excitedly. "Did anybody ever hear of such a thing? Why, this friend of yours is a prince—nothing less; a prince, every inch of him."

"He is better than that; he is a true man," said Evelyn, wistfully, though she seemed quite as pleased as her friend.

"What a horrid democrat you are. I tell you he is a prince, and it would not take much to make me fall in love with him. I really think I shall. One might almost propose to a man like that, out and out. He wouldn't tell, and he is too good to refuse. I must let father know. He need have no anxiety about the rent now. Why, when the

hay is sold we shall be absolutely rich. And it is all your doing, dear."

"My doing! How?"

"Why, didn't he come here to see you, and isn't it because of his friendship for you that he has done us this great kindness?"

"What are you saying, Lucy? You forget!" exclaimed Evelyn, as a dark, almost desperate look swept over her face.

"I was forgetting, my poor darling. Forgive me—" kissing her—"Oh, Evelyn, I wished they had hanged him—any other man would have hanged himself."

"Hush! for Heaven's sake, hush!"

And then, arm-in-arm, they walked slowly and sadly into the house.

In the meantime, George was cantering in high spirits through the glades of the forest towards Fairmead. No more forebodings, no more misgivings. Evelyn always received him so kindly, spoke to him so graciously, and listened to him so attentively, that further doubt would have been downright disloyalty. He read consent in her eyes, and felt sure that, when he had an opportunity of pleading his cause, the day would be won.

For the second time within a week George Brandon could eat no dinner.

"No fish? And you have had no soup! If riding affects you in that way you will really have to give it up," said Rufine, with authority. "To me it appears that the more you ride the more you don't eat. Where have you been to-day?"

"About in the forest."

"You ought to know well that forest. I do not think, though, that it is the forest which spoils your appetite; it is the riding. Your liver, unlike your heart,"—smiling—"is soft, and the trot, trot, trot, is more than he can bear, and too much shakes him. It is again a little congestion. But there is always that beautiful medicine, the invention of my dear father. You still have some?"

"I have. Your father was a wonderful man, Rufine, and I will certainly take some of his tonic to-night."

Which he did—in the same way as before, and with the same result, to his sister-in-law's great satisfaction, but to her husband's great disgust, for observing that he was also slightly off his feed, she prescribed him a large dose, and saw that he took it. Peter looked very pale next morning, and, though he was far from hungry, protested—having the fear of another dose before him—that the mixture had done him a power of good, and managed to make a seemingly hearty breakfast.

"We shall have Ned here to-morrow," he said, after he had read his letters, at the same time looking dubiously at his brother. The astute lawyer was on the horns of a dilemma. He had reasons for not wanting his son to know that he had applied to George for a loan, yet he could think of no plausible excuse for asking him to keep the matter from Edward. This being the case, he decided to let things take their course, for he knew by experience that an abortive effort to retrieve a false step is often more damaging than the original mistake.

"I am very glad Ned is coming. He is so very nice,"

observed Rufine, who, except when she lost her temper, or "sat on" her husband—which was pretty often—always did her best to look amiable. "You have seen him, George; don't you think him very nice?"

George cordially assented.

"He will be pleasant society for you. You can make walks together on horseback," added Rufine, inadvertently falling into a French idiom.

"Yes, and I can give him a good mount. Brandywine is several stones above his weight; could carry him over a haystack almost."

"But that would be awfully dangerous, would it not, jumping with stones over a high stick?"

George smiled, and Peter indulged in a rather malicious chuckle. The tonic was still rankling both in his mind and elsewhere.

"Oh, I see, I have made a stupidity. What means it?—stones above his weight over a high stick!" If there was anything she disliked more than making a stupidity it was being laughed at.

Peter laughed again, but George kindly explained, and was rewarded with a profusion of thanks so pointed as to imply a sharp reproof to her husband, whose leathery face, however, gave no token of penitence. She did not venture to be more explicit, for though in general submissive enough, there were times when he showed signs of incipient restiveness, and this was one of them. Rufine was too wise a ruler to provoke her greatest subject to open rebellion.

The evening brought Edward, and the next day, on his uncle's proposal, they had a ride in the neighbourhood

of the forest, but not in it ; George, for reasons of his own, taking care to give Wild Roses a wide berth.

"I suppose your father has spoken to you?" he asked his nephew, as they settled into a steady walk, after a preliminary canter over the turf.

"He has spoken to me about several things. Do you mean anything particular?"

"Yes, the five thousand pounds."

"The five thousand pounds? What five thousand pounds?"

"He surely cannot have told you," returned George, with a look of annoyance. "You have five thousand pounds to pay Meyer and Falkner?"

"Yes, the second instalment in connection with my partnership ; and it falls due in a fortnight. What of it?"

"Why, your father told me that he could not find the money, and asked me to lend him as much."

"I had no idea ; he said nothing of the sort to me," answered Ned, now in his turn looking annoyed. "I had no idea there would be the least difficulty. I always thought my father was rich."

"Very likely he is ; only hard up for the moment, which may easily happen, you know."

"But he should have mentioned it to me first. I daresay Meyer and Falkner—— I am awfully sorry he has asked you for the money, though, Uncle George."

"It is perhaps as well that he did, Edward. But tell me, now, the details of the arrangement with these people."

"Well, nothing could be much simpler. The *pater* has paid in five thousand, which stands to my credit, and on

which they give five per cent. interest. At present I have merely a salary, but when the second instalment is paid, I become full partner and sign the firm."

"Don't become a partner, Ned."

"Don't become a partner with Meyer and Falkner! Do you know what you are saying, Uncle George? Why, they are one of the most rising houses in Manchester. I have seen their balance-sheet, prepared by an accountant, and they pay cash for all they buy."

"That may be, and I daresay they are solvent enough—for the time being. I mean nothing but your good, Ned. When your father asked me for this money I decided at once, for reasons which it is unnecessary to mention, to refuse. But I thought, if it would really do you a good turn, I would lend it to you, feeling certain that if you failed to pay me back it would not be for want of honest effort. Observe the condition—if it would do you good. To satisfy myself on this point I have been making very particular inquiries about Meyer and Falkner, and from information I have received I should be sorry to trust them fifty pounds, much less make them a present of five thousand—for that is what it would come to."

"All the same, I think you are mistaken, I do indeed. My father also made inquiries, and the information he got was very different from yours; and I have been in the concern two years, remember, and if there was a screw loose I should have found it out by this time."

"Not a bit of it. For though you are in the concern you are not behind the scenes, and my information comes from somebody who is. Written answers don't amount to

much. The writer has always to pick and choose his words, and you must read between the lines. You may believe me or not, but I tell you that Meyer and Falkner's draw on some very weak people, both in London and the East, and one of these days—— However, I won't prophesy. True, their promptitude of payment is a good sign ; but it entirely depends upon their discount facilities. They have no reserve of capital to fall back upon, and if one or two of their customers burst, or their bankers put the screw on—you will see what you will see. I understand, too, that Meyer and Falkner do a good deal in charter parties——”

“Yes, and they have made money that way.”

“Which they will lose, and more with it. They are sending the “Frantic” to Maulmain for rice, and the “Happy-go-Lucky” to Bombay for cotton, and by the time these vessels reach their destination, there will be three tons of freight offering for every ton of cargo obtainable, and they must either take perfectly ruinous rates or come home in ballast.”

“But I say, Uncle George, how did you get to know all this?”

“That I cannot tell, without betrayal of confidence ; and I mention these facts only to show you the accuracy of my information. I should be very sorry for you to be misled.”

“I am sure you mean nothing but my good,” said Ned, earnestly, “and if I could see my way—— Have I your permission to repeat what you have been telling me to my father?”

“Certainly. Always, of course, on condition that he

keeps it to himself, and does not compromise me with Meyer and Falkner."

"Of course. To do that would be an infamy, after all your kindness. I am awfully obliged to you, Uncle George."

They were jogging on in silence, the young fellow being evidently much put out and indisposed for conversation, when the sound of wheels was heard behind them."

"Better draw up on one side," said George. "The road is narrow hereabouts, and Cock Robin is always frolicsome when anything passes him."

The next moment a little phaeton, drawn by an old grey pony, and occupied by two ladies, drove by. The driver was Miss Pemberton, her companion Evelyn Waters.

"How do you do, Mr. Brandon?" exclaimed Lucy, reining in, while Cock Robin pranced about as if he meant to leap over the hedge.

So soon as George had steadied his horse, he doffed his hat, and after saying something about the unexpected pleasure, introduced his nephew. Then they went on together to the next turn, which led to Wild Roses.

"When are you coming to see us again? You know we are always glad to see you," said Lucy.

"Oh, one of these days; before very long. How are your father and mother?" answered and asked George, with assumed carelessness.

Evelyn said hardly anything; neither did Ned. He was too much taken up with looking at the young women, especially at Miss Waters.

"Well, this is a go!" he exclaimed, after they had parted at the cross roads, "That Miss Waters is either the female

Crusader we saw at Whiteshingles, that you took such a fancy to, or her double."

"You are right. Miss Waters and Sister Evelyn are one and the same person."

"But how the deuce—— I mean how has she got into this part of the country, and how did you find her out?"

"That is easily explained;" and then George told his nephew who Miss Waters was, where he had met her, and how he had made the acquaintance of the Pembertons.

"So Sister Evelyn is the sister of the heroine of the story of the chain. People may well say that truth is stranger than fiction. That accounts for the likeness we both noticed in the photograph. But, I say, how did she become a Crusader? It was a point on which you were very curious, you know."

"That I cannot tell you. I have only known her a very short time, remember, and it is a matter as to which I have no right to question her."

"Of course. I only thought you might possibly have heard. But, I say, what a change dress makes! I hardly knew her in that straw hat and light costume. She is awfully good-looking, don't you think? So is Miss Pemberton. Which do you prefer?"

"Well, I think of the two, Miss Pemberton is the better looking."

"I think so, too. Anyhow, she is a good deal the more lively. Miss Waters was quite mum. She did nothing but look at you."

"Look at me! Nonsense."

"She did, though, especially when Cock Robin was

kicking about so much. Seemed as if she was making ready to scream, or faint, or something or another, in case you got spilt. Oh, here is a place I wanted to show you. It is a favourite meet of the foxhounds. Those osiers near the river are always a sure find. I've seen many a good run from here. No hunting in Bombay, I suppose?"

"Yes, there is. But we hunt hyænas, not foxes—with English foxhounds, though — and get very fair sport, too."

George was not sorry to change the subject, but he had no expectation that it would not be renewed, or that the presence of Evelyn at Wild Roses would much longer be a secret at Fairmead.

"The cat is out of the bag," he thought, "and Rufine will be all the more suspicious that I did not tell her before. It would have been better if I had been less reticent. But, after all, what does it matter? It is more a matter of feeling than anything else. I have nothing to fear from her. Once we are engaged she may go—walking, as she would say in her own language. She can do me no harm."

His anticipations were so far realised, that Ned started the subject almost immediately, and at dinner told all about seeing Sister Evelyn at Whiteshingles, and meeting her and Miss Pemberton while he and his uncle were out riding.

Rufine showed great curiosity, but whether she was pleased or displeased did not appear. She made George tell her all he knew, or chose to impart, about Miss Waters and the Pembertons, and seemed disappointed that he could tell her no more.

"And you have been making visits at Wild Roses all

this time and never said a word! My faith! It looks as if you wanted to keep those beautiful young ladies all to yourself. *Quel homme vous êtes!* You are quite a man of mystery and adventure. You will make me afraid of you soon, as the servants are afraid of your Ali Baba."

"Afraid of Ali! Why should they be afraid of Ali? He is quietness itself."

"That is just it. They say he is too quiet—and so observant. They say he misses nothing and already knows almost everybody's secret."

"I am sure I am not like that. I miss a great deal; it is you who miss nothing."

"Yes, I do. I did not know that you could be secret; that you were—what shall I say? Laying siege to the hearts of two pretty girls. But, seriously, why did you not tell me, and I would have called on the Pembertons and made the acquaintance of your fair Crusader? It is not too late yet. Do you think I might call, Peter?"

"Certainly. Though the Pembertons are rather reduced in circumstances, they are respectable. And Miss Waters is the daughter of one distinguished officer and sister-in-law to another. Her father was rather high up in the service, wasn't he?"

"Lieutenant-General, when he died," said George.

"Waters! Waters!" repeated Peter. "The name seems familiar to me."

"Very likely. It has been mentioned in despatches."

"And it is not at all an uncommon name," put in Ned. "About on a par with Brandon, I should say."

"Brandon is a good old name, and by no means as

common as Waters, let me tell you," retorted Peter, with dignity.

"Nor as old either, by a long chalk."

"How do you make that out?"

"Doesn't it say in Genesis that the Waters covered the face of the earth. I don't think there were many Brandons then, *pater*."

"I detest bad jokes about sacred subjects," rejoined the *pater*, severely. "Besides, that has nothing in the world to do with it. Of course I have heard the name of Waters often enough. I was merely going to remark, *en passant*, that it seems to be familiar to me in some particular connection which I am unable just now to recall. You will leave my card, of course, Rufine, and you might get up a lawn-tennis party, and invite the young ladies, while Ned is here."

"What a splendid suggestion. It does you immense credit, *pater*. By all means adopt it, *mater*. I have an ardent desire to make Miss Pemberton's further acquaintance."

"*Nous verrons*. I will do my best, dear Ned. I shall make myself the pleasure of calling on these charming ladies the day after to-morrow."

Rufine seemed pleased. She liked to be called *mater*, probably because it was a homage which her husband's children seldom saw fit to pay her.

"It is all right," said George to himself. "True, she chaffs a bit—no harm in that—but does not appear the least bit either suspicious or jealous. She will make no bother when she knows, and be civil to Evelyn. I am sorry

I made that will, though : it may have given rise to expectations. All the same, they had no right to assume I should not marry. I must see Evelyn and the Pembertons to-morrow, and tell them of the intended call, and perhaps I shall have a chance. If not, I must make one—take the bull by the horns and ask for a private interview.”

And then—as if he had suddenly remembered the fact—he told what he had arranged for Mary—that she was going to stay at Wild Roses.

“How good of you?” exclaimed Rufine. “You are so thoughtful for everybody. It will be so much pleasanter for Mary to live in the country than that horrid East End. Still, I am sorry she has not come to us. But I daresay she will be more independent with the Pembertons, and we can have her over often.”

George did not read his sister-in-law rightly. He took too much for granted. Rufine was both suspicious and jealous—furiously jealous. Only by a great effort had she managed to keep her countenance and hide her feelings. Since she knew, or fancied she knew, that Peter was comparatively poor—perhaps insolvent, she thought—she had become more than ever anxious to secure, somehow, a slice of her brother-in-law’s fortune for her little boy ; and albeit she may not have loved George in the ordinary sense of the word—the sense once suggested by Mary—she cared so much for him, and liked power so well, that she could not bear the idea of his becoming the lover—or husband—of a woman who would exercise over him the influence which it had become the great object of her life to obtain. If it were

possible to prevent such a catastrophe she would prevent it ; and in this visit to Wild Roses she scented danger to her designs. But which of the two young women, Lucy Pemberton or Evelyn Waters, he preferred, or rather—as she put it to herself—which of the two was most likely to entrap him, she could not tell. It was what she had to find out

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### CONQUERED.

“THEY are all out,” said the housemaid at Beech Hall, who answered George’s summons. “Mr. Pemberton is somewhere on the farm ; Mrs. Pemberton and Miss Lucy have gone in the phaeton to Waltham, and Miss Waters is in the forest. She went towards Little Beech Wood about half-an-hour since. Will you step in and sit down till some of them come back.”

“No, thank you,” returned George, rather curtly, and turning from the door, he led his horse towards the gate.

“Mr. Brandon is in a bad temper to-day, I think,” murmured the maid ; “him as is always so nice, and the last time I opened the door for him gave me half-a-crown. I suppose it is because the young ladies are not in.”

The girl was mistaken. George was not in a bad temper, only preoccupied and thinking what he should do. He decided quickly, as he always did. The nearest way to Little Beech Wood was by a footpath through the meadow behind the house ; but this would have involved putting-up his horse, and the maids would have known at once whom he sought. But by riding about half-a-mile down the road

that ran past the house, and striking into the forest, he could make his point unobserved.

No sooner thought than done. In a few minutes he had left the road, and Cock Robin was cantering gaily over a stretch of turf, broken here and there by clumps of furze and patches of white sand. The air was still, the sky, for a wonder, clear, and neither incongruous sight nor discordant sound marred the sweet serenity of the scene. The wild note of the lark mingled with the coo of the wood-pigeon, rabbits gambolled among the bushes, and once a deer darted across the ride and disappeared in the thicket. The tender light of the dying day was beginning to steal over the landscape, and two skirts of cloud, silvered by the sun, hung like fairy banners over the masses of verdure that bounded the horizon. They were so bright and beautiful that George, who was naturally in a brooding humour, tried to think they augured well for the successful issue of his enterprise; for now that the critical moment neared, his old misgivings returned. He did not fear a refusal—he had made up his mind on that score—it was something sinister, vague, obscure—a shadow of evil, darkening his hopes of happiness. It was absurd, of course—at least so he tried to persuade himself—and if only to put an end to these intermittent, unbidden, unreasonable doubts, he had fully made up his mind to delay no longer. Should he not find Evelyn in the forest, he would go back to Wild Roses, wait until she returned, and “have it out.”

Little Beech Wood is reached, and after making several unsuccessful casts, George descries the object of his search. She is standing in contemplative attitude, between a gnarled

old oak and a pond covered with water-lilies, into which, Ophelia-like, she is throwing wild flowers. So absorbed is Evelyn in thought—or her occupation—that George has dismounted from his horse and hung the bridle to a crooked bough before she notices him.

Roused by the crackling of a branch under his tread as he goes towards her, she turns quickly round and utters an exclamation of surprise.

“You here, Mr. Brandon! I—I had no idea—I did not see you. I thought I was quite alone. You were having a ride, I suppose, and saw me by chance?”

“Not altogether. I called at the house; they told me you were in the forest, and I came here hoping to meet you, for I have something to say——”

On this, Evelyn, with a half-alarmed look, steps hurriedly backward, and George pauses and draws a deep breath. He finds it more nervous work than he had expected.

“I have something to ask you. I hope you will not think me abrupt. But speak I must, and I am too old, too much in earnest, to whisper soft nothings, and beat about the bush. When first I saw you at Whiteshingles—I was deeply impressed. Every time I have seen you since, that impression has deepened, until                      What can I say? Your noble nature has altered all my ideals. You are the only woman I ever loved. I love you as only a man old enough to know his own mind can love, and I want you to be my wife—will you?”

For answer, Evelyn gives him a look of intense, agonised surprise. Her whole attitude—her pale face, twitching lips and startled eyes, are expressive of fear — fear almost

amounting to terror. Then, covering her face with her hands, she weeps as if her heart would break.

"Oh, forgive me!" exclaims George, passionately. "I have been too abrupt, too sudden. But my love was too great to let me wait longer. Forgive me, and let me have the sweet assurance that my love is returned. You will be my wife, won't you, darling? There is nothing to wait for—no impediment, nobody to please but ourselves."

As he speaks he draws her to him, and, laying her unresisting head on his shoulders, kisses fondly her tear-bedewed cheeks.

"God forgive me, and help me in this hour of trial!" By a sudden movement she disengages herself from his embrace, and stands before him dishevelled, panting, her face aflame and arms outstretched. He would have approached her, but with energetic, almost indignant, gesture she motions him back.

"Go! leave me!" she exclaims.

"Pray calm yourself, Evelyn," says George, soothingly, although he is beginning to feel both hurt and alarmed. "There is no need for all this agitation. That you should be surprised I can understand, but why the confession of my love should put you so much about, is incomprehensible. Calm yourself, darling——"

"No! no! no! It is impossible, impossible!"

"But you love me. Just now you came willingly to my arms. I read it in your eyes——"

"Yes, yes,"—impetuously—"I love you; I love you. I will not add to my fault by further deception—by a lie. Yes, I love you; but I cannot do this that you ask."

"But why? You say you love me, yet you cannot be my wife. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. I cannot be your wife."

"But why? I ask you again, why?" repeats George, now almost beside himself with apprehension and excitement. "Why cannot you be my wife, Evelyn Waters?"

"Because, God help me, I am married already."

He reeled as if he had received an actual blow the ground seemed to be sinking under his feet, and it was several minutes before he could collect himself sufficiently to think and answer.

"Married already! I cannot believe it," he says at last, in a voice broken with emotion. "One of us must be mad, Do I hear aright, or are you speaking foolishness?"

"It is only too true," she answers, slowly and with painful effort. "It is only too true. I was married nearly four years since, and my—my husband is still living! Oh!"—passionately—"why did I not prevent this? Why did I come here? But it was only the last time you were here that my eyes were opened. I came to this spot to avoid you, and to-morrow I should have been gone. Oh, forgive me! forgive me!"

"Forgive you," exclaims George, now wild with disappointment and rage. "Forgive you! All very fine to ask for forgiveness after you have broken an honest man's heart and wrecked his life. Why have you done it, woman? Why have you sailed under false colours—worn no wedding-ring—given it out that you were single—called yourself Miss Waters? In what have I injured you that you should do me this wrong? Forgive you! Never! You are a fraud

—or worse ; and if you had your deserts I should throw you into that water.”

“ But that the deed would leave the stain of murder on your soul, George Brandon, I should ask you, in all sincerity, to do it. I would willingly die to expiate the involuntary wrong I have done you. You have a right to be angry, yet before you utterly condemn me, listen to what I have to say in extenuation of my offence—let me tell you my wretched story—how very unfortunate——”

“ Go on,” said George, sullenly. “ Though you pretend to believe—and preach—what you call the Gospel, you have acted a lie. Try and speak the truth for once.”

“ Oh, you are cruel—cruel,” cries Evelyn, leaning, faint and trembling, against the oak. “ Yes, I will tell you the truth—the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—and then, though you may no longer—respect me, you will perhaps have a little pity.

“ You knew my father and mother. He was a stern man, she a strong-willed woman, and we were brought up in habits of strictest obedience. But they loved us much ; we had a happy home, and they were kind to us—according to their lights. Their great desire was to marry us well, for my father, though he had a fair income, was not rich. Marrying us well meant of course getting us husbands with ample means and good social positions, and to this end my poor mother, as we grew up, devoted her life. Our own wishes—fancies they were called—were not considered in the least, and we had been too well-drilled to rebel. Lillian, although she preferred Somers, did not dare to refuse poor Foster, and but for the things which so strangely happened, she

would have married one man while she loved another. After that we came to London, and lived in Praed Street, and went into society, and before I was twenty I received an offer of marriage from a man who had the reputation of being rich. He was at the head of several important companies in the city, dealt largely in stocks and shares and money, kept yachts and hunters; and his family being respectable and his manners good, he was in every way a desirable *parti*, and I was considered very fortunate. When my mother saw what was coming, she told me what I had to do, and I did it. I told her that I did not particularly care for the man, but she said that was nothing, the liking would come with marriage, that I should have a very fine establishment, that my father and herself fully approved of the match, and that I ought to esteem myself very lucky to win Mr. Conroy's regard, for he was evidently very fond of me.

"I have a stronger will than Lillian, and if, like her, I had loved another, I think I should have had the courage to refuse. But I did not—he was kind and generous, and as I was expected to marry somebody with money, I thought I might as well marry Wilton Conroy as anybody else. And I have said I would tell the whole truth. I was dazzled with the idea of making such a brilliant marriage. My mother's teaching had not been in vain. Very sordid and worldly you will say. It was, and we were fearfully punished. We had a grand wedding, the house was full of guests, and just as I came down in my travelling dress and all were waiting to see us off, my husband was arrested on a charge of forgery and taken away to prison. He had speculated

wildly, and to meet his losses had committed gigantic frauds.

"The disgrace and humiliation were more than I could bear. I nearly lost my reason. It killed my father. A proud man, with a keen sense of honour—his rage and distress were something terrible. He forbade me to bear my husband's name, tore off my wedding-ring, crushed it under his heel, and requested all his friends to speak to me and treat me as if I had never been married."

"But surely," broke in George, "so shameful a marriage as this cannot be valid. The law would never sanction so horrible a mockery."

"So at first thought my father, and he made every effort to have it cancelled. But it was no use. The contract had been made, and no court had power to annul it. My father died within a few months of my marriage, my mother shortly afterwards. After their death I joined a Protestant sisterhood. My position as the wife of a convicted felon was so horrible that mixing in society was quite out of the question, and the sin of which I had been guilty of marrying a man I did not love so preyed on my mind that I fell into a state of utter despondency. But the sisterhood, though it made me feel better for a time, did me no real good. The life was too tranquil, too monotonous, and, as I thought, altogether too selfish. The sisters seemed to give their minds entirely to the saving of their own souls. Little help the world got from them. I wanted something to do; actual work that would take me out of myself, opportunities of ministering to others who were worse off than I was. I wanted to go about trying to do good. It was then I heard

of the Crusaders, and though I could not approve of all their ways, nor accept all their doctrines, I joined the army as a volunteer, and except to spend a few days with my sister or Lucy, I have never left them. Whether I have done much good, I know not, yet I sometimes think that God has blessed my labours a little. I had ample scope for my energy, while thinking of others I had no time to think of myself, and if I did not find happiness, if I could not forget the past—that I was the wife of a felon, who might some day come back and claim me—I knew many peaceful days and was learning to put full trust in the divine goodness when, when—— How shall I say it? When you crossed my path, and now my heart is more troubled, my future darker than ever. What shall I do? What shall I do?”—drooping her head and clasping her hands—“Why did I see you? Why did you follow me? I had begun to fear we were in danger, and to-morrow I should have been gone.”

“Where is your—this man?” asked George, abruptly.

“He was sentenced to ten years’ penal servitude. I believe he is at Dartmoor.”

“Well for him that he is, for if he were at large I should kill him.”

“Mr. Brandon! George! Do you know what you are saying?” asked Evelyn, in an intense whisper, her face paling with fear, for quietly as he spoke she could see that he fully meant what he said.

“Quite well, Evelyn. I would kill Wilton Conroy with as little hesitation as ever I struck a man down in battle, as I killed the *sowar* from whom I took this chain. Has he not done worse than murder—killed your father, covered an

honourable family with disgrace, and wrecked the lives of two people who never did him harm?"

And then George sprang forward, and heedless of her resistance, folded her once more in his strong embrace.

"Oh, my darling," he whispered, looking lovingly into her eyes, "how cruelly you have been used, how terribly you must have suffered! And I, wretch that I am, flouted you—said that you were a fraud, that you had deceived me—acted an unworthy part. Forgive me, I knew not what I said. Oh, how much nobler you are than I—and yet you love me! Again I ask you to forgive me. And I love you, as I thought it was not possible for man to love woman. No, dearest, I shall not let you go until you have heard all. Listen to me! You are this man's wife only in name. Before God it is no true marriage. I am your husband, because you have given me your heart. Why should this convicted felon stand between us? Unjust laws are not binding on the conscience. Come with me. We will go to some other country, and be true to each other till death do us part."

"George Brandon, do you know what you are asking me?"

"Yes. To be my wife."

"No! Let us look the thing fairly in the face. The only way to be true to each other is to speak without reserve. You ask me to be your mistress; for so long as Wilton Conroy lives, I am his wife and cannot be yours. Well, I have misled you, and I owe you some reparation. I will do what you wish. I know that I shall be a dishonoured woman; that I shall lose my reputation and imperil my soul.

But even this sacrifice I will make—if you deliberately demand it. Do you, George?”

She raised her pleading face to his. He met her gaze with troubled eyes, his knitted brow and compressed lips showing the direness of the struggle that was raging in his soul.

After a long silence, and still holding her in his arms, he spoke the word which was to decide their fate.

“You are a grand woman, Evelyn,” he said. “You know how to conquer, and you have conquered—by the power of love. If I loved you less I should accept this sacrifice. As it is, I refuse. No man must be able to point the finger of scorn at the woman I love. Until you can be my wife, let us remain as we are.”

“It is as I expected,” she exclaimed, joyfully; “I know you better than you know yourself. I felt sure that you did not really want me to do wrong. You say I have conquered. No, darling, it is you, not I, who have conquered, for you have conquered yourself. As for me—I loved you before; now it is more than love. And we can hope. God is good. Perhaps a way may be opened.”

“And we can see each other?”

“Sometimes; but not too often. It might give rise to suspicion—lead to a betrayal of our secret.”

“And it must be a secret, Evelyn—even from Miss Pemberton.”

“Lucy is my dearest friend. I have never kept anything from her. But my will is yours. Let it be so. And now, don’t you think we had better separate? It is very retired here, yet somebody might see us.”

"In which case our secret would be almost revealed. You are right. Still, it is hard to let you go. Walk with me as far as the road—there will be nothing to excite suspicion in that, even though somebody should see us. A casual meeting in the forest, a walk of a few hundred yards—what could be simpler or more correct? And then you can return to the house through the meadows. But you will not go away to-morrow?"

"As you wish. Shall I stay a few days longer?"

"By all means. It is something to know you are so near, even though we may not meet. By-the-bye, Mrs. Brandon intends to call on the Pembertons to-morrow, and will, I believe, ask you and Lucy to a lawn-tennis party she is going to give."

"Shall I accept?"

"Of course. It will be another opportunity of seeing each other. Only don't take it amiss if I pay Lucy rather more attention than I pay you. My sister-in-law has eyes for everything, and I daresay will be very much on the *qui vive*."

"Oh, no! I shall not take it amiss. Only mind, on your part, that you don't make Lucy fall in love with you."

"If you think there is a possibility of anything so awful," said George, smiling for the first time since they had met, "you had better tell her how the land lies."

They were walking through a narrow lane, George leading his horse. On reaching the road they shook hands—nothing more—and as Evelyn disappeared in the forest, George got into the saddle and rode slowly away. If he had turned his head—which he did not, being much pre-

occupied—he would probably have seen at a bend in the lane, and partly hidden by an overhanging tree, a little pony cart, occupied by a lady, a nursemaid, and a small boy.

“*C'est ça, c'est ça !* murmured the lady when the lovers emerged from the forest. “It is as I feared ; but which is it? She is too far off for me to distinguish her features ; but the tunic and the hat—I shall know them again, and when I make my call to-morrow, I shall find out whose they are. You would catch him, would you? *Nous verrons, mademoiselle, nous verrons.*”

And with that, Mrs. Brandon shook the reins, and followed in the direction taken by her brother-in-law.

“If I overtake him, how he will be surprised!” she thought with a sardonic smile, at the same time giving her pony a flick with the whip. But Rufine did not overtake him, and it was herself who was destined to be surprised.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### A BOLT AND A FALL.

THOUGH self-denial, like honesty, is popularly believed to pay in the long run, it does not perhaps always give unalloyed satisfaction to him by whom it is practised. Acting uprightly is not invariably a pleasure—if it were, who would not be virtuous?—and albeit there are many persons—let us hope the great majority—who cannot do wrong without suffering remorse, there are doubtless occasions when some of the less immaculate minority regret that they have lacked courage, or, it may be,

presence of mind, to do ill. There is a deal of human nature in the story of the wicked Irish Peer, who, when on his deathbed, being exhorted to repent, answered that as he had never denied himself anything, he did not know what he had to repent of.

Had George Brandon been a model character he would no doubt have reflected on the part he had just played with unmixed pleasure, and been lost in admiration of his own virtue; but being an ordinary mortal—though with good impulses and a rather strong will—he was disposed to think he had acted like a fool. It might have been less heroic, but would it not have been better for them both, wiser from a commonsense point of view, if he had accepted the sacrifice, and taken Evelyn at her word? After all, marriage was only a civil contract, and if the law in certain cases rendered its observance burdensome and unjust, why should it be respected? And to hold a woman to such a contract as that which Evelyn had made with Wilton Conroy, was unjust to the last degree. Unspeakably wicked, it seemed to George. This man had not only deceived Evelyn and her parents, he had been sentenced to a long term of penal servitude, and as if his innocent victim had not already been sufficiently punished, the law must condemn her to lifelong celibacy. It had deprived her of one husband and yet forbade her to take another.

“It is atrocious,” murmured George; “as bad as the Hindoo widow system, which self-righteous English people think so wrong and demoralising. Is it not rather a man’s duty to defy such a law than obey it? For, after all, what is law? The will of the majority. Why should I bow to

the will of the majority when their demands conform neither to the dictates of justice nor commonsense? Justice, indeed! I suppose, now, if Evelyn and I were to go through a form of marriage, she might be prosecuted for bigamy. I do believe that law perpetrates more iniquities than it prevents. If Evelyn . . . Ay, there's the rub. After what has passed I could not—well—I should not like to urge her to take a step of which her conscience could not approve—which she could not take with all her heart. For me it would be nothing; for her it would mean exclusion from the society of kindred and friends, and, as she thinks, peril to her soul.

No, no, it would be bad—cruel—to require this of her, and ask her to make so great a sacrifice. Still . . . What then? How will it end? I cannot live without her. Is there no way? How long is that villain likely to live, I wonder? Why does not he commit suicide, or kill a warder and get himself hanged? They say that penal servitude is terribly hard on a man. What sort of a constitution has he? I must inquire. Curse the hound! If I only had him here——”

And then in his rage—forgetting all about Letz's caution and Cock Robin's feelings—George struck his spurs savagely into the horse's ribs, and as the very much surprised animal bounded forward, struck again. The next moment he regretted what he had done and patting him on the neck, said, “Steady, old man, steady,” by way of apology, but Cock Robin was now past holding, and shot out as if he were “racing for a man's life.” The ground being open, George let him go, thinking to pull him up before they reached the enclosed country, something less than a mile

ahead. But, as the horse-dealer had said, he might as well have tried to pull a steam engine up, for when a horse really means going, no man whom he is powerful enough to carry is strong enough to stop him.

Without swerving either to the left or to the right, the runaway took the first fence—a ditch and bank—in his stride. Then another, and another, and still he went on, heeding no more his rider than if he had been a wooden doll or a “dumb jockey.” George had now his work before him. For the moment he forgot all about Evelyn and love, and thought only of his own life which he knew was in deadly peril, Robin being so madly excited that he would have run his head against a house side or jumped into a marl pit with equal indifference. He would evidently go on until he was blown, and as yet there was no sign of his being blown. He galloped as strongly as at the beginning.

George, looking well forward, took an occasional pull at Robin’s head, guiding and steadying him with hands and knees as best he could. So far the fences though big had not been formidable ; a few hundred yards ahead, however, was what appeared to be a brook, but which proved to be a narrow road between two fields and about five feet below their level, with a low edge on one side and a widish jump on the other. Now a jump into a country road is always a ticklish business and requires to be done cautiously and deliberately, for if your horse happens to “miss his tip” and rolls over among hard stones and sharp flints, the consequences are likely to be very unpleasant both for his rider and himself. To go at it full gallop would be pretty nearly as dangerous as charging a squadron of infantry single-

handed. Yet this was what Cock Robin seemed bent on doing. Again George tried to stop him, straining at the reins until he thought they would break. But it was not a bit of use, and fearing that continued pulling might provoke a fall, he slackened his hold, gripped the saddle firmly with his thighs, and resigned himself to his fate. Robin, seeing that there was something before him bigger than usual, pricked up his ears, shook his head, and gathering his hind legs well under him, went over everything, clearing the hedge, the ditch and the road at a single bound, and landing safely on the other side.

George drew a deep breath, and Robin, after a slight stumble, pulled himself together and galloped onward as resolutely as ever, though not quite as fast. The pace was beginning to tell. Then followed a few more fences, and there loomed before them—running between a pasture and a turnip field—a stiff flight of posts and rails, with a big drain on the other side.

“He’ll do that, easy,” thought George, but as the horse rose at the jump his rider saw to his horror an almost invisible wire, fully sixteen inches above the topmost rail. Robin saw it, too, and by a tremendous effort cleared the obstacle with his fore feet, but catching it with his hind legs, rolled over into the turnip field, his rider partly under him. The next moment both were on their legs, but when George tried to run he fell as if he had been shot.

Two rustics, who had been hoeing, and witnessed the catastrophe, came up in a state of great excitement.

“Where be the doogs, master, where be the doogs?” exclaimed the first.

"Doogs be darned, there's no hunting this time o' year, man; doan't you see as it's a point to point? Have you won, sir, have you won?"

"I think I have, and a big prize, too."

"What is it?"

"My life. But catch my horse, one of you."

That was easily done, for Robin was quite spent, and limping on three legs, one being badly cut by the wire.

With the help of the men, George managed to get himself and the horse to a farmhouse hard by. After seeing Robin put in the stable, and promising to send for him later on, he hired the farmer's milk cart and drove to Fairmead. All this had taken a very short time, and when Rufine got home George was upstairs in his room with Ali bathing his leg. But the servant told a terrible tale of Mr. Brandon's accident, gathered from the farming-man who had come with him, and of the condition in which he had arrived—scratched face, torn clothes, almost fainting, and requiring the help of both Ali and the butler to get upstairs. She was naturally very much surprised, and showed, and doubtless felt, great concern, yet she could not help the thought crossing her mind that if her brother-in-law had broken his neck, though it might have been a bad job for him, it would have been an excellent thing for her little boy.

When the village surgeon, who had been promptly sent for, came, he pronounced George to be suffering from a severely sprained ankle and a contused knee.

"You won't be quite right for a month or two," he said, "but if you keep perfectly still you may be able to move about on crutches in five or six days."

"You must never ride that horse again," quoth Rufine. "If you do, he will be the death of you."

"Oh, yes, I shall," answered George; "it was my own fault, and Robin is the finest jumper in England."

"But not for some time?"

"Certainly not," said the surgeon. "He must not so much as think of crossing a horse for four or five weeks. That knee is very much bruised."

"*Tant mieux*," thought Rufine; "he won't be able to meet that minx in the forest for ever so long, and I shall have him here, all to myself."

"I will give up my lawn-tennis party," she said. "It would not be nice while you are in this state."

"Not on my account, if you please. I don't play, you know, and in three or four days I shall be able to sit and watch."

"If you think so, to-morrow I shall go and make the acquaintance of your friends at Wild Roses. You like very much these young ladies, I think?"

"No more than other young ladies," returned George, coolly. "They are certainly very nice and that, but nice young ladies are so very plentiful and so very much alike, that it is almost impossible to remember which was which an hour after you have seen them, much less have preferences."

"*Ma foi*, how these men are deceivers," murmured Rufine. "But he himself is the deceived this time. He little knows what I have seen this day."

She went to Wild Roses as she had proposed, and on her way thither bethought her of an expedient whereby—the

clue of the hat and the tunic failing—she might discover with which of the young women George had been phantasmagorizing in the forest. She would tell them of his accident, make it to the worst, and watch the effect. The one who showed the most alarm and concern would, of course, be the culprit. But to her great disgust the first question asked by Lucy and Evelyn, almost simultaneously, was about the wounded man. They had heard of his spill already. A surprise was thus out of the question. The hat and tunic test likewise came to nothing, Miss Pemberton and Miss Waters being so similarly attired, and so much alike in height and shape, that Rufine had reluctantly to admit that with their backs turned it would be impossible at two or three hundred yards' distance to tell one from the other. So she went back in a very bad humour, and no wiser than she came.

In the meanwhile, George was suffering both in body and mind. His leg ached, and his mind was ill at ease. To give Evelyn up, to abandon all idea of marrying her, was quite out of the question. He would not think of it. A way must be found. But how? It was little use trying to find a flaw in the marriage with Conroy. The Waters had every conceivable motive to get the knot untied, and would doubtless have done so had such a thing been possible. All the same, he would seek out some London lawyer who made a speciality of matrimonial cases, and offer him any fee he liked to ask if he could free Evelyn from her bonds. But so long as he remained a prisoner it would be impossible for him to do anything; for it was not a case that could easily be explained in a letter, and he would want to ask many

questions. There was nothing for it but to wait until he could move about. But he chafed terribly, and the doctor declared him to be the most impatient patient he had ever known. A week later, on the day of the lawn-tennis party, he could move about a little with the help of a pair of crutches, and though conscious of cutting rather a ridiculous figure, he had the pleasure of seeing Evelyn and exchanging a few words with her *sotto voce*. But his most particular attention was reserved for Lucy, and Mrs. Brandon quite made up her mind that it was she who had been with him in the forest, and that if they were not already engaged they soon would be, unless she could do something to prevent so undesirable a consummation.

This impression was confirmed on the day following by a piece of intelligence communicated to her by her husband.

"I told you," he said, "that I thought I had heard the name of Waters before in some particular connection. I could not remember how or where at the time, but I have done so since. Miss Waters's right name is Conroy—Mrs. Wilton Conroy."

"*Mon Dieu !* She is already married, then ?"

"Yes ; and her husband is a convict now at Portland or Chatham, or one of those places."

"And I have actually had her in my house. *Quelle horreur !*"

"I don't think you need let that trouble you. She is very respectable, received everywhere, I believe, and greatly to be pitied." Whereupon the lawyer told his wife all the facts of the case, which had come to his knowledge while acting for one of the companies defrauded by Conroy.

"Do you think George knows this?" she asked.

"I cannot tell. But I should think so. He is an old friend of the family. He has seen Colonel Somers. He is almost sure to know. All the same, it was kept very quiet. I mean it did not get into the papers. Nothing was said about the Waters at the trial, and though the fact of the marriage was known to a good many people, it did not get bruited about as such things generally do."

"If George knew, he certainly ought to have told us. It was a shame of him not to do so. Other people may do as they like, but as for me, I object to associating with the wives of *forçats*."

"Well, I don't know. The less that is said about some things the better. And as for Miss Waters, I am sure I don't want you to associate with her, unless you wish. But as you are so anxious to stand well with George, I would not advise you to take that line with him. The Waters are old friends of his, remember."

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### NO HOPE.

ALTHOUGH she exclaimed "*Quelle horreur*" so naturally and fervently, Mrs. Brandon had really no feeling whatever against Evelyn on the score of her unfortunate marriage. She had associated with far shadier folks than *forçats'* wives, and the knowledge that Evelyn was quite out of the running, and that she might give undivided attention to Miss Pemberton, afforded her decided satisfaction. But it pleased Rufine to pose as a fastidious respecter of *les*

*convenances*, and she spoke under a sense of considerable irritation. She was vexed that George had not himself told her Evelyn's story. She wanted to know everything, and was very much disposed to hate people who kept things from her and refused to submit themselves to her influence. So long as her brother-in-law made her handsome presents, paid her marked attention, and let her believe that he was a rich Indian nabob whom she could twist round her fingers, she liked him immensely. Perhaps, if all had gone smoothly, and he had continued to please her, she might in time have entertained for him a warmer feeling. But now that he was going his own way, disregarding her wishes—wittingly or unwittingly—and forming dangerous intimacies with designing young women, she felt herself cruelly slighted, and her erstwhile partiality was fast changing into dislike. Having, moreover, quite made up her mind that he would and ought to provide for her little boy, she had a strong objection to any proceeding on George's part—such as marriage—which might interfere with the performance of so obvious a duty. So long as she thought her husband rich, the loss of George's fortune, or a share in it, would have been merely a disappointment; now it would be a disaster. This anxiety as to the future of so young a child may appear somewhat absurd and far-fetched, but Rufine belonged to the class of small French *bourgeoisie* who begin to lay by for their children as soon as they are born; her maternal instinct was more intense than is usual even with French mothers, and she loved her boy "not wisely but too well."

She had, therefore, several strong motives for preventing, if she could, the marriage which she felt sure her brother-in-

law contemplated—love of power, the anger of a woman who imagines herself slighted, and a passionate desire to secure a fortune for her son.

But there is a wide difference between desire and fruition, conception and execution, and she did not find it by any means easy even to conceive a plan whereby George, if he were so minded, could be hindered from marrying. He kept his own counsel and went his own way, direct interference, or even hinted advice, might cause him to leave her house, possibly to alter his will. Whatever course she might adopt it was a matter of absolute necessity that she should not let her hand be seen or her object suspected.

The day after the lawn-tennis party, George announced his intention of going to town.

“But won’t that be very bad for you?” remonstrated Rufine. “Your leg is still far from well; you cannot walk without pain, and crossing the line and going down steps and that will be very awkward for you.”

“I don’t mean to cross the line. I have sent Ali to Letz for a carriage and pair, and shall drive all the way.”

“You have very important business, then?”

“Yes,” said George, drily. “I have very important business.”

Rufine, perceiving that her brother-in-law was not disposed to be more communicative, bit her lip and held her tongue.

His business was to see a solicitor—a certain Mr. Lewin—who was supposed to have had greater experience in divorce cases, and to be more conversant with the law of marriage, than any other man in the profession.

He gave George very little comfort, however.

"The marriage was quite regular," he said. "There is no chance of getting a divorce; and, so far as I am aware, no reason to suppose that when Conroy married Miss Waters he had a wife living—that he committed bigamy, in fact. Short of that, the contract is unimpeachable."

"But would it not be possible to obtain a special Act of Parliament dissolving the contract?" asked George, grasping, like a drowning man, at a straw. "That was once the accepted way of getting a divorce; and it is really an infamy, you know, to hold Miss Waters to a mock marriage."

"I agree with you about the infamy, although there is something to be urged on the other side. But an Act of Parliament is quite out of the question. We live in a democratic age, my dear sir, and Parliament could not grant to a rich man a privilege which is not within reach of a poor one. It was mainly to meet this objection that the present law of divorce was passed. I fear that so long as Conroy lives he will have to be considered this lady's husband. And for a man of his habits, penal servitude must be a terrible ordeal. If you like I will find out where he is, and what are his chances of life."

"Thank you," said George, turning away with a sickening sense of disappointment and despair. "I cannot say that I am anxious for him to live, but it would be absurd to count on his death as a probable contingency. Why, the man is younger than I am. Is this really the only hope?"

"So far as I can see—the only one. All the same, there can be no harm in looking up Conroy's antecedents. There

might be something undiscovered by General Waters and his solicitor ; something, you know, which would invalidate the contract. Marriage is full of pitfalls, my dear sir, and there are many people who are as anxious to get out of it as you are to get into it. Ha ! ha !”

“Very well, make this inquiry then, and let me know the result as soon as you can,” said George, abruptly. He was by no means in a humour to appreciate Mr. Lewin’s pleasantry. “It will cost money, I suppose. Here is something on account,” handing him a twenty pound note.

The lawyer pocketed the money with an expressive smile, told one of his clerks to write out a receipt, and on parting with his client expressed the hope that their next interview would be of a more satisfactory character.

“Back to Fairmead !” said George to the coachman.

“Hope ! Hope ! I see none !” he murmured, as he threw himself into a corner of the carriage. “That scoundrel won’t die just to suit my convenience. Why should he ? And as for a flaw in the marriage, that is past praying for. Still, there is the off-chance, and I won’t throw a chance away—not one. If that fails ! . . . Yes, I was a fool. Why should we allow ourselves to be bound in these conventional fetters ? There is nothing wrong. . . I will see her again and make another appeal, for give her up I will not ! Whatever happens, Evelyn shall be my wife or——”

He did not complete the sentence, for he instinctively shrank from putting bluntly, even to himself, the alternative which, sophisticate it as he might, implied dishonour to the woman he loved.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## GEORGE LOSES HIS APPETITE.

IN the meanwhile, Rufine was burning with curiosity to know what the important business which had taken her brother-in-law to town could be, and when he came back she commissioned her maid to ascertain from Ali—who accompanied his master—where they had been. The maid might as well have interrogated the Monument. “Hundreds of streets, great many places,” was all she could get out of the follower of the Prophet.

It then occurred to Mrs. Brandon that she might obtain from the driver—who was often at the railway station—the information she required, and this ; by the exercise of a little artifice, she contrived to do. They had only called at two places, the man said—a bank in the city and a lawyer’s office in Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

“*C’est ça, c’est ça*,” murmured Rufine. “He will make another testament, and goes to another lawyer because he will not that Peter knows. What must be done?”

George’s next journey was to Wild Roses. He might possibly get a word in private with Evelyn, and, as he hoped, arrange for a meeting elsewhere. She might like to know what the lawyer said, and he would very much like to see her before she returned to town. He made no secret this time of his intended visit.

“I am going to call on the Pembertons,” he said to Rufine. “My sister will probably be there by this time. She was to be there either yesterday or to-day.”

“Give her my love, and say, please, how glad we shall be

to see her at The Cottage. And make my compliments to Miss Pemberton and Miss Waters. I suppose it is too true that Miss Waters is already married—though she does not call herself by her husband's name—and that he is a great villain. What a pity !”

In saying this, Rufine made a mistake, and knew that she did, but feminine spitefulness, the desire to let her brother-in-law know that she was not quite as ignorant as he might suppose, and vexation that he had not asked her to accompany him, were too much for her prudence. At the risk of angering George she yielded to the impulse, regretting, of course, the moment after that she had done so.

“I believe it is true,” he said, coldly. “But it is no business of mine. I do not like to rake up matters which are better left alone and which those concerned desire to have buried in oblivion. It was a very unfortunate affair, and, as you say, Miss Waters is greatly to be pitied.”

“Of course. That is what I meant. I am sorry you think my remark indiscreet. I was forgetting you were a friend of the family. You will pardon me, won't you?” said Rufine, in her most winning manner.

“I have nothing to pardon.”

“Oh, but you were vexed. Your eyes darkened, as they always do when anything annoys you. But I have made the *amende honorable*, and now before you go, accept a cup of tea in token of your forgiveness.”

“With pleasure,” said George, who did not think it polite to let Rufine see how angry and “put out” he was by the discovery she had made.

“How do you like this tea?” she asked, a few minutes

later, with a bland smile. "I know you are a connoisseur of tea."

"It is not bad. But if you want something really good, you should get some Assam tea; Kangra Valley is the best."

"I will," returned Rufine, eagerly. "I will send for some to-morrow. I also like good tea. Would you please write me down the name on this piece of paper, and say where it can be obtained?"

With this request George promptly complied, and shortly afterwards he was on his way to Wild Roses, where, as he expected, he found Mary, and the only *tête-à-tête* he had was with her. All his attempts—very cautiously made—to get a word in private with Evelyn were foiled; partly because, being still lame, he could not move about, partly because his sister kept nearly always by his side, perhaps with the intent of shielding her brother from the sad fate which had overtaken herself.

"Which of them is it?" she asked, the first time they found themselves alone for a few minutes. "You said it was not Miss Pemberton, so it must be Miss Waters."

"I don't quite see the 'must,'" said George, smilingly. The idea of taking Mary into his confidence had already occurred to him, only, however, to be dismissed. He had no right to reveal, even to his sister, a secret which might compromise Evelyn.

"I see one thing, though," answered Mary, regarding him keenly. "If you come here often you are sure to fall in love with one of them. I know I should if I were a man. There is a gone look about you, too, which I never saw

before. They are awfully nice, too, both of them. I don't know . . . Come now, isn't it Miss Waters you are in love with? She is sure to make you miserable, *cela va sans dire*. But if you must marry, you might do worse than marry Miss Waters. I have been watching her closely, and unless I am much mistaken she is that *rara avis*, a good woman; and comely if that counts for anything, and it generally does with you men."

"Do you know, Mary," said George, gravely; "do you know that you are asking me whether I have fallen in love with a married woman?"

"A married woman! What do you mean? I am talking about Miss Waters."

"So am I. Miss Waters, unfortunately for herself, has a husband; though for a very sufficient reason she does not bear his name." And then he told her Evelyn's story. It seemed the best way of parrying his sister's questions, and it would profit nothing to keep her in the dark. If she did not learn the facts from him she would be sure to learn them from somebody else.

"Poor young woman! I am sorry for her. Another awful example. It is as I have always said—marriage means misery for somebody, sooner or later, and generally sooner than later. It cannot be nice to be tied to a convict for the term of your natural life. Yet when you come to think of it, the position is not without its advantages."

"Advantages. What on earth are they? I see none, and I am sure Miss Waters does not."

"Why, don't you see, my foolish brother, that the next best thing to having no husband at all is to have one for

whom you do not care, with whom you have never lived, and whom you are not likely to see for a dozen years or so ? Then she is effectually prevented from marrying anybody else, and so making herself and some unhappy man as wretched as married folks generally are—nineteen times out of twenty, I should say.”

“That is certainly one view of the matter,” answered George, laughing in spite of himself, for he was not precisely in a laughing mood, “and if marriage is a mistake you are all right. But you have not the courage of your principles. Why are you so anxious to find Harold ?”

“Because he is so very unfortunate—and I am weak enough to love him.”

“You call love weakness, then ? Ah, Mary ! But here comes Miss Pemberton and Miss Waters. It would perhaps be as well to change the subject.”

This passed in the garden ; and shortly afterwards tea was announced, which Mrs. Pemberton, either in honour of Mary’s arrival or George’s visit, or, it may be, the double event, had made even more abundant than usual ; but, greatly to her distress, George could eat nothing.

“I am afraid you are not well, Mr. Brandon,” she said.

“Oh, yes, I am. Quite well. At any rate, I feel so. It is simply that I have no appetite. I made a good lunch, though.”

“Appetite is a sign of health,” returned Mrs. Pemberton, decisively ; “and if you cannot eat you cannot be well. You must eat this new-laid egg, if only to oblige me. I am an old woman, and know what is good for you better than you know yourself.”

George, with obvious effort, contrived to eat the yolk of the egg and swallow a few bites of bread.

"He is in love," thought Mary. "If it is Miss Pemberton, he must have his way, but if it is the other, God help him and her."

"He is suffering for me," thought Evelyn, and it was all she could do to avoid looking at him continually, and to prevent her face from betraying her concern. When they shook hands the pressure of his was returned, and he thought he could read in her eyes the renewed assurance of her love. Not much, perhaps, nor all that he wanted, but it gave him a melancholy satisfaction, and he went back in somewhat better heart than he had come.

When his carriage—one of Letz's—was announced, Mary accompanied him to the gate.

"Mrs. Pemberton is right," she said, anxiously. "You are not looking as well as you were, and this loss of appetite is a bad sign."

"Don't be absurd, Mary. It is only a touch of liver. I shall enjoy my dinner all the more for not having taken any tea."

"I hope so. All the same, I should be better satisfied if you were where I could look after you a little myself. Don't you think you would be more comfortable at a place like this, among people who really care for you, than at Fairmead?"

"That is very probable, I think ; and to tell the truth I am getting rather tired of Fairmead. I fear Peter is the cad he always was, and Rufine is—well, not quite as disinterested and sincere as she might be."

"Ah! you are coming round to my opinion at last. Didn't I tell you?" said Mary. "And—but you men are so very blind where women are concerned. The stupidest of us can hoodwink you. Shall I ask the Pembertons if they can find you rooms?"

"Not just yet. It will be a great bother removing, and whenever I do leave there will be a scene, perhaps a row."

"You are soft, George."

"No, I don't think I am. Only you must remember that I have enjoyed their hospitality for some time; whatever be their motives, they have been very kind. And, after all, Peter and I are sons of the same father. I would rather avoid a breach if possible, and if by waiting a little while—All the same, I don't think I shall remain much longer at Fairmead."

The last words, spoken when they were close to the carriage, were overheard by the coachman—the same who had driven George to town—and being by him repeated to the servants at the Cottage, were reported in due course to Mrs. Brandon.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

### GEORGE FALLS ILL.

GEORGE was mistaken in thinking that because he had made a poor tea at Wild Roses he should make a good dinner at Fairmead. He ate hardly anything, and both Peter and Rufine remarked on his want of appetite.

"Aren't you well?" asked his brother.

"If I may judge by my feelings, I am quite well. Seem

to be off my feed, though. But a few hours' fasting will do me good. I shall be all the better for it in the morning."

"You are forgetting the tonic," said Rufine, reproachfully.

"Very ungrateful of me, I am sure. But the fact is, I fear it is all finished." He meant that he had thrown it away.

"I will mix you another bottle. Promise me, now, you will take a dose this night."

George laughingly promised—with a mental reservation.

"The Kangra tea will be here to-morrow," continued his sister-in-law, "and I will give Ali a pound for your particular use."

"Ali, it may be mentioned, took his master a cup of tea at six o'clock every morning, Indian fashion; and none of the servants being up at that hour, the duty of preparing it devolved on Ali himself, and Mrs. Brandon had placed at his disposal a special caddy, which the cook replenished as occasion required.

George thanked her for her kindness—with an uncomfortable feeling, however, that all these attentions would make his going away, if he did go away, seem all the more ungrateful. Her motives might be open to question, but her affability was undeniable.

When he went to his room he found the tonic on his dressing-table, and attached to the bottle was a piece of paper, on which was written, "Be sure you take some."

"'Pon my word, I think I will just give it a trial," thought George. "It isn't quite satisfactory to be off one's feed like this; and there is no use denying it—at any rate to myself—I don't feel quite up to the mark. So here goes."

And with that he took the dose which Rufine had prescribed. "Awfully bitter," he murmured. "I don't believe it will do me any good, after all. I never did like physic."

He was right, for, as touching his appetite, the stuff did him no good whatever. He drank his morning tea as usual, but instead of making his wonted hearty breakfast, he could eat but one piece of toast, and swallow, with difficulty, a single cup of coffee.

"Off your feed still?" exclaimed Peter. "You had better see somebody, I think."

"If you had only taken a dose of my dear father's tonic," said Rufine, in a tone of tender reproach, "you would have eaten, this morning, like a hungry grenadier."

"I did take a dose," answered George, rather bitterly, "and, as you see, I don't eat like a grenadier."

"You surprise me; but take only another dose now, and in an hour you will have the appetite of an ostrich."

"You are very kind—perhaps another time—but I will try, first, what a ride will do for me. My leg is so much better that I am sure I can sit a horse. And, after all, there is no tonic like the open air."

The ride was taken, and proved so far effectual that when the rider came in he contrived to eat a mutton chop, albeit with little enjoyment. In the afternoon he drank a cup of tea, prepared for him by Rufine, but he had again no appetite for dinner, and went fasting to bed. The following day he had still the same distaste for food, and hardly a vestige of appetite, although at Rufine's pressing request he did force himself to eat a little. All the same, he was conscious of no unpleasant symptoms, and had it not been for

a sense of growing weakness, he would hardly have known so far as his sensations were concerned, that he was not in perfect health. It was only after this had gone on for four or five days, and he had become so feeble that he could scarcely mount his horse, and his legs tottered under him when he walked, that George would admit, even to himself, that he was suffering from anything more serious than a slight touch of liver, for which fasting was the surest cure. Like most strong men who have never known what it is to be ill, he had rather a contempt for doctors and physic, and was as reluctant to consult the one as to swallow the other. He turned a deaf ear to Peter's frequent suggestions, warmly seconded by Rufine, that he should "see somebody." Even his faithful Ali could not persuade him to send for one or other of the Fairmead *hakims*.

"I shall be better to-morrow," was his invariable answer to these appeals.

Once or twice he was rather better on the morrow, and ate with something like appetite, which he rightly regarded not only as a favourable sign, but as a good thing in itself. On the whole, however, he did not gain strength, rose late in the morning, grew visibly thinner, seemed to be losing his energy, and often kept his room the greater part of the day.

Things were in this state when Ned, who had been on a visit to his sisters in Surrey, returned to Fairmead. He was greatly shocked by the change in his uncle's appearance.

"This won't do at all," he said to his father and step-mother. "Uncle George is really very ill, whatever you or he may think. He is not like the same man. Why, he can hardly walk, and since I saw him last he must have lost

twenty or thirty pounds in weight ! You must get a doctor to him at once."

"You exaggerate, Ned ; I don't think your uncle is at all seriously ill, and those liver complaints generally get better of themselves, I fancy. However, I quite agree with you that George should see somebody, and I have told him so over and over again. So has your stepmother. But it isn't a bit of use. He says he doesn't need a doctor, and won't have one, and to send for Sandford or Mostyn, or anybody else, without his consent, would not only vex him but make it seem as if we thought him in a very bad way indeed—much worse than he is, in fact. But try what you can do, persuade him, if you can, to let us send for either Sandford or Mostyn. I don't care which."

"Sandford is the best," suggested Rufine. "He is a very nice old gentleman, and has had so much more experience than the other."

"That is a matter of detail," said Ned. "The essential point is to get him to consent to 'see somebody,' as my father puts it. I will go and speak to him at once."

But the young man was no more successful than his elders had been.

"You are very kind, Ned," said George, "but I won't have a doctor just yet. I don't think there is really any need. I have just eaten half a mutton chop, and feel better already. I shall be all right in a day or two."

The young man could not help smiling. But the next moment he felt sorry. There was something almost pathetic in the idea of George Brandon regarding the consumption of half a mutton chop as a thing to be proud of.

Ned tried again, and still again, to prevail on his uncle to listen to reason, but always without avail; and he was going regretfully away, when Ali, who was continually hovering about his master's room, and whom Ned found outside, touched him on the shoulder.

"The sahib is very sick," he whispered, "and he will not have a *hakim*—a doctor."

The young man nodded.

"If he sees not a doctor he will die. He should see a doctor this day."

"I quite agree with you about the doctor," said Ned, who was much struck with Ali's manner, "the trouble is that he won't have one. I have been trying to persuade him, but he absolutely refuses. I have not given up though. I shall try again in a day or two."

"A day or two may be too late. My master is very sick."

"No, no, it is not so bad as that. Besides, what is to be done? Uncle George is not the sort of man to be coerced. If he won't he won't."

"It is true. But there is one person who can make him——"

"And that is——"

"The Mem Sahib. His sister, Missy Minton. You must see her and make her come to him this day."

"A capital idea, Ali! Aunt Mary can manage him if anybody can. I will go to Wild Roses and see her, right away."

With that, Ned returned to his uncle's room and asked if he might have one of his horses for a ride in the forest.

"By all means," said George. "Take Brandywine; he wants exercise. Ali will fetch him for you. I wish I could go with you, old man."

"I wish you could, George, with all my heart. But never mind, we'll have you well in a day or two, and before I go back to smoky old Manchester we must have at least one canter in the green glades of the forest."

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### LIVER OR LOVE.

AN hour later, Edward Brandon was at Wild Roses, telling his Aunt Mary his errand. She seemed almost stupefied.

"George ill!" she exclaimed. "Not able to eat! I can hardly believe it. Why, he is the strongest and healthiest man I ever knew. Of course, he must have a doctor, and though I did say—— But never mind that; I will go to Fairmead this very afternoon. No wonder we have seen nothing of him lately. But why didn't somebody write to me?"

"That is more than I can tell you. I only got home late last night. You will come immediately then? It is very desirable you should."

"Immediately. I will ask Mrs. Pemberton to let me have the phaeton, and I am sure Lucy will drive me over."

This proposal was acted on forthwith, and Ned rode with the ladies to Fairmead, keeping mostly on Miss Pemberton's side of the carriage, perhaps, because his aunt seemed indisposed for conversation, as in truth she was, her mind being much exercised about her brother. Ned's

account of him had alarmed her. Her life, moreover, had been so full of sorrow and disappointment that she was always prone to expect the worst.

"Poor George!" she thought. "If anything happens to him it will be just like my luck. . . The only relative or friend who cares for me. What can it be?

Surely not love! No! George Brandon is not the sort of man to die of love. Did any man ever die of love? I doubt it; they haven't it in them. Still, there is

something. I read it in his face the last time I saw him—when he was at Wild Roses. It may have been liver, but it looked a good deal more like love. Lucy?

No! Lucy admires him and, I daresay, would have him if he asked her. All the same, she is heart-whole—yet. There would be no cause for him to pine about her. It must be the other, then. She seemed very quiet and low after he was gone, and on the following day went off to London. Yes, that would explain a great many things. He didn't deny it either—only said something about the absurdity of supposing he could fall in love with a married woman, and so threw me off the scent. Absurd, perhaps, but, unfortunately, not impossible, and never was if the decalogue is anything to go by. Oh, it is just like a male creature to go and lose his heart to another man's wife—above all a convict's wife—when he has a whole world of single women to pick and choose from! If it is so, something must be done, or there will be further trouble. But, after all, that cannot be the cause of his illness. George is too much of a man to lose his appetite for any woman. I must see him and hear what the doctor

says, and then I shall have to put on my considering cap."

She did see him, and was appalled to find what a portentous change a few days had wrought in her brother's appearance. His limbs were visibly shrunken, his cheeks hollow, and his voice was weak and shaky.

"Not see a doctor!" she exclaimed. "Only a temporary loss of appetite! You will be all right in a few days! You mean, I suppose, that you will be in your coffin. Don't you see, you foolish boy, that this inability to eat is an effect, not a cause? Probably the effect of a very simple cause. A doctor worth his salt would tell you what it is in five minutes, and cure you in as many days. I suppose you don't want to die?"

George laughed faintly, and admitted that he had no particular wish to join the majority just yet.

"Well, then, you must have a doctor at once. Which shall it be? There are two at Fairmead. Doctor Sandford, a practitioner of the old school, intensely respectable, prosy and orthodox, and extremely popular with nursing mothers and little babies. The other, Doctor Mostyn, a young fellow almost fresh from College, but very scientific and that, and has the reputation of being clever."

"I give in, Mary; no use trying to resist you," said George, with a sigh. "It is very kind of you, I am sure, to give me a choice of masters, for when once you call in a doctor your liberty is gone. Send for the young fellow by all means. He is on his promotion, and will doubtless do his level best to pull me round as soon as possible; and that

prosy, pompous chap, I am sure I could not abide. He came when I hurt my ankle."

"You are right. Ladies' doctors are my abomination; they are too glib, smooth and oily to be clever. If my poor boy were only here and in his right mind! For whatever may be his faults of conduct, nobody can deny that he is clever. I shall send Ali for Dr. Mostyn, then?"

"Do. He will no doubt want to look at my tongue, auscultate my heart, sound my liver and all that sort of nonsense, besides asking me no end of ridiculous questions, and the sooner I get it over the better."

Ali was sent off forthwith—nothing loath—and found the doctor at home, who, as George had suggested, being on his promotion and keenly solicitous for patients, lost no time in responding to the summons. A young man he was, but rather portly withal and affecting a gravity of manner more befitting fifty or sixty years than the six or seven-and-twenty he had actually attained, yet possessing in full measure two qualities without which a physician, however learned in theory, is of very little use in practice—sympathy and a faculty of quick observation.

"You are suffering from dyspepsia," he said, after asking his patient a few questions. "That is quite clear. There is also considerable nervous disturbance. I cannot say much of the cause, though. Your liver seems quite healthy, and there is nothing in your habits—— Did you ever have anything of the sort before?"

"Never been off my feed or unable to sleep at nights in my life before, and the last night or two I have hardly slept a wink."

"Never knew you had either stomach or nerves, in fact," said Mostyn, with a smile. "Strange! Dyspepsia generally comes on gradually, and gives a man ample warning before it assumes so severe a form. However, I think we shall soon have you all right—always provided you strictly follow my injunctions."

"Tell me what to do, and I will do it," said George, resignedly, "I am in your hands."

"Well, in the first place, you must knock off your morning tea. I shall allow you neither tea nor coffee. Take instead, a glass or two of new milk—as early as you like; then an hour later a freshly laid egg, beaten up with two teaspoonfuls of old brandy. Never mind whether you like it or not. Swallow it. At noon, another glass or two of milk and a slice or two of cold toast. Wash it down with the milk, if the dryness of your mouth prevents you from swallowing. I shall also send you a mixture which you must take as directed, and about the middle of the day I will see you again. For supper to-night, the yolk—mind, only the yolk—of a lightly boiled egg. I mean that you must make yourself take it, however disagreeable it may be—as if it were medicine, in fact."

"So it will be," said George, wearily. "That is the strange part of it; I have no desire for food whatever; the mere smell of it nauseates me, and eating is a painful operation. However, I will follow your directions to the letter, and see what comes of it. But it will be a trial, going without my tea. It is the only thing I care for."

Mrs. Minton, who had been anxiously waiting to hear the

result of the examination, waylaid the doctor as he was leaving the house.

"Well," she said, "what do you think? Is he as ill as he looks—dangerously ill, I mean—or is it just a severe attack of indigestion?"

"I do not think your brother is in any immediate danger," answered Doctor Mostyn, gravely and cautiously, "but I cannot say there is no cause for anxiety. If the malady had been allowed to go on a few days longer unchecked—if you had not called anybody in, I mean—the consequences might have been very serious."

"But you think now——?"

"I think now that with care we may have him all right in a few days. But I am not infallible, you know, and it is a queer, and, in some respects, rather a mysterious case."

"Queer and mysterious?"

"I mean that though the diagnosis presents no particular difficulty, the cause of your brother's illness is decidedly obscure. I was remarking only the other day, that I hardly ever saw a man of more splendid vitality or with an apparently sounder constitution. His habits, too, seem to have been most regular, and he never had dyspepsia in his life before. Yet this attack comes on, so far as I can learn, without any preliminary symptoms or assignable cause. I can only suppose that he has eaten, without knowing it, something extremely indigestible—perhaps gone on eating it several days. However,"—smiling—"the cause is a secondary matter; our present concern is to cure him. Who looks after him?"

"My sister-in-law, Mrs. Brandon, exercises a sort of general superintendence, I believe. She is in town to-day, but Ali, my brother's Indian servant, is really his nurse, and takes better care of him than any woman, or, at any rate, any woman in this house, could or would do."

"Good! It is to Ali I must give my directions, then. Shall I have the pleasure of seeing you here to-morrow, Mrs. Minton?"

"Very likely. I shall certainly come every day until my brother is better, whether Mrs. Brandon likes it or not."

Dr. Mostyn looked surprised, but he was too discreet to ask questions which concerned neither himself nor his patient, and shortly afterwards went his way.

Mary was not long in following his example. She had no particular wish to see Rufine, who might now be back at any moment, and her conscience rather pricked her for keeping Lucy Pemberton waiting so unconscionable a time. But Mary's misgivings on this score were quite unnecessary, that young woman having passed a very pleasant hour with Ned in the billiard-room and garden.

The drive home was rather slow—in more senses than one, for the old cob never went at a very tearing pace—and Mary was too much occupied with her thoughts to care about talking; and Lucy, guessing her friend's wishes, did not ply her with many questions.

When they were about a mile from Wild Roses, and in a part of the forest where the trees, meeting overhead, lend to the scene, especially when the sun is low or the day gloomy, a weird and melancholy aspect, a man came out of the

thicket, some fifty yards lower down, and after pausing a few seconds in the middle of the road, glided again into the wood.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Mary, clutching her companion's arm. "That man—did you—did you see——?"

"Yes, I saw a man. Nothing alarming in that, I hope, He was clothed, and no doubt in his right mind, and vanished as suddenly as he appeared."

"That man, Lucy, is my poor boy—my husband, I mean—or his ghost. I saw the face distinctly."

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### A RANDOM SHOT.

WHEN Mrs. Brandon returned from town, about an hour after Mrs. Minton left Fairmead, she did not seem at all pleased with the turn which things had taken during her absence.

"You might have waited till I came back," she said to Ned.

"Excuse me, *mater*, but I really don't see why. And as both my father and yourself thought somebody should be called in, and as I could not prevail on George myself, I went for Aunt Mary. Everybody knows she has more influence over him than anybody else."

"Ah, you think so," said Rufine, with an ill-concealed sneer.

"I am sure. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Aunt Mary came and the doctor has been."

"What doctor? I wanted to see him myself. Your

uncle is in my charge, remember. You sent for Dr. Sandford, of course?"

"I sent for nobody; but Ali, I presume by his master's orders, fetched Mostyn, and Mostyn came, and will no doubt come again," answered Ned, warmly; for his stepmother's manner was even more offensive than her matter. She seemed to be in a state of great nervous irritation.

"They should have sent for Sandford. Why didn't they send for Sandford?"

"Probably because George considers Sandford an old woman—and he is quite right. I wouldn't let him doctor a consumptive cat—unless I wanted it to die."

"That is what you think. And this other man—Dr. Mostyn—what does he say?"

"That George is suffering from a severe bout of dyspepsia and some nervous derangement; but that he will have him right in a few days."

"Oh! he says that, does he? Well, let me tell you that he is wrong, this clever doctor of yours. He does not understand the case. I tell you George Brandon will not get better in a few days—perhaps never."

"You did not say so this morning. You seemed to think there was not much the matter with him. Perhaps you don't want him to get better."

A random shot, but it told. Rufine drew in her horns immediately.

"I spoke hastily," she answered. "I was so excited at the idea of poor George being improperly treated that I knew not what I was saying. How can you be so cruel? Not want George to get better! Why, I would almost give

my life for him. Next to your father there is no one I so much respect. That is why I am so vexed they sent for this very young man, in whom, I frankly admit, I have no confidence."

"Young! Why, he is eight-and-twenty if he is a day, and serious enough for seventy."

"Well, twenty-eight is young for a doctor. However, if I am wrong, *tant mieux*. It will be all the better for poor dear George. Time will show who is right, and I shall be only too glad if I am wrong."

It seemed as if Rufine was likely to have abundant reasons for gladness. When Dr. Mostyn came on the following day, he found a decided improvement in his patient's condition. George had taken his mixture, drunk his milk, eaten four eggs instead of two, and two slices of toast instead of one, and was now anxiously waiting to know what else he might eat; and feeling, as he said, ready to tackle a beefsteak or even a small leg of mutton.

The young doctor looked pleased—the correctness of his diagnosis was being proved by the success of his treatment.

"It is as I thought," he said, with a grave satisfaction, in almost ludicrous contrast with his years. "You were suffering quite as much from inanition as from dyspepsia. You were sick and sleepless because your stomach had nothing to do. There are occasions when it is necessary to force oneself to eat. But I don't think I can allow you to eat a leg of mutton at a sitting, just yet; you are still very weak, and we must proceed cautiously, or your second condition will be worse than your first." And then he gave such further directions as he thought necessary. One was to

continue taking the mixture, which, it may be as well to mention, Dr. Mostyn prepared in his own surgery.

"I suppose I may go out for an hour or two?" asked George.

"Certainly not—at any rate to-day. The quieter you remain for the present, the better. I don't think you have any idea how weak you are. You could no more walk down stairs than you could fly to the moon. A few days more and you would have been unable to rise from your bed, and your recovery might have been an affair of weeks."

"Can you account for it yet?"

"Not altogether. Even if you had unwittingly eaten something extremely indigestible, that would not sufficiently explain all your symptoms. Have you had any severe mental shock, or serious anxiety — about business, for instance?"

"Yes. I have had both, though the cause is quite unconnected with business. Still, I don't think—I mean, if I may speak frankly, that I am not the sort of man—that I have too much commonsense and *savoir faire* to let myself be physically prostrated by a disappointment, however great."

"No, you do not look like a man who is much given to despondency. The disappointment might be a contributory cause, but it could hardly be the efficient cause."

"Very slightly the cause, I should say; for it exists yet—the anxiety, I mean; but, as you see, I am better, thanks to your treatment."

"Yes. After all, the cause must be mainly physical, and it cannot be wrong to go on as we have begun. Continue

the milk and eggs, eat also some fruit, and you may have a mutton chop or some roast fowl for dinner; but, whatever you do, keep quiet, and worry yourself as little as may be."

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

### A LETTER FROM LEWIN.

"NOT worry myself!" soliloquised George, when the doctor was gone. "All very fine, but how am I to help worrying? And the quieter I keep the worse I am. He may say what he likes, but if I feel as much better to-morrow as I feel to-day, I will have either a drive or a ride before the week is over."

Nevertheless, George could not help feeling that he had not been quite as candid with Dr. Mostyn as he ought to have been. The disappointment, as he called it, lay heavier on George's soul than he liked to own. Since his memorable interview with Evelyn in the forest, he had hardly known a moment's peace. His moods varied from the extremity of depression to paroxysms of rage. He had a shrewd suspicion that, after all, the cause of his illness was more moral and mental than physical, though he did not want anybody to think so, and he was glad that Mostyn had not questioned him more closely. His disquiet and anxiety were aggravated by Evelyn's silence. There was no particular reason why she should write to him—there were perhaps good reasons why she should not write to him; for albeit he had asked her to be his mistress, and was by no means resolved that he should not ask her again, he had a morbid dread of

injuring her reputation, or doing anything that might compromise her with her friends.

"How could I look Somers in the face?" he thought. "How tell them in India? If We would go to some foreign country and never set foot in England again. Curse that fellow. I wish I had him by the throat. No, it wouldn't be murder. But there is no chance of that. I see no way out of it, no gleam of light anywhere. Had I not better give it all up and go back to India before worse happens?"

He knew quite well that he should do nothing of the sort; that he could not give Evelyn up if he would, and would not if he could. But whatever might be the cause, he was in a condition of extreme nervous agitation, the weakness of his body seemed to have a reflex action on his mind, and he who had never before known what it was to halt between two opinions, resolved one hour only to rue the next. His irresolution extended even to the merest trifles. It was with the greatest difficulty that he could decide whether he would lunch on a mutton chop or roast fowl, and he ended by ordering both, deferring his final decision until he should see them both before him on the table. Rather to his surprise, he succeeded in demolishing one and part of the other, and feeling thereafter better in body and much less miserable in mind, he thought he would read his letters. He had glanced at their outsides earlier in the day, but not seeing any handwriting that looked like Evelyn's, he did not take the trouble to open them.

The first he took up was from Colonel Somers, asking him to dinner on the following Monday.

"I'll go, of course," murmured George, "if only on the off-chance of seeing Evelyn or hearing something about her."

There were two other invitations—one to dinner from an old Bombay acquaintance, who lived at the West End, and a third to a garden party at Barnet.

George laughed.

"A nice figure I should cut at a garden party," he thought, as he took up a fourth letter. "Why, I look like a scarecrow, and totter as I walk. I should frighten them all. Who is this from, I wonder? Never had a letter from this chap before. Ah! Lewin 'Gad! Can it be true? Have I read it aright?"

Then, after reading the letter through, again and still again, until every word of it was burnt into his brain, he uttered a cry of exultation and sprang to his feet, but, unable to stand from weakness and excitement, he sank back, trembling, into his chair, bent his head, and, for the first time since his childhood, wept. His ten days' illness had not only paralysed his will but well nigh reduced him to the condition of a hysterical woman.

The letter ran thus :—

"DEAR SIR,

"I have received some highly important news concerning the convict Conroy, which I hasten to communicate to you.

"As I hinted, when I had the pleasure of seeing you here the other day, I have a powerful friend at the Home Office, upon whom I can always depend to procure for me, without delay, full information about prisoners in whom any

of my clients may be interested. The very day after your visit, I put forward an inquiry about Conroy, the answer to which I have just received. The communication in question being strictly confidential, and, from the official point of view, highly irregular, I am not at liberty either to send you the original document or a copy thereof, but if you call here I shall be glad to show you my friend's letter—always excepting the signature—which, for obvious reasons, I am under a pledge not to disclose. I can, however, state the purport of it in a few words. Conroy is sick and like to die. The medical officer at Dartmoor reports that he is in an advanced state of consumption and has not long to live.

“It would thus appear that there is every likelihood of Miss Waters being relieved from her bonds without the help of the law, and from that quarter, so far as I have been able to ascertain, there is nothing whatever to be hoped. The marriage is unquestionably valid.

“I have arranged with my friend to keep me regularly informed as to the progress of Conroy's malady, and when I hear from him again I shall not fail to let you know. So far as Conroy himself is concerned, death would be a happy release; for a man of education, such as he is, who has played a part in the world and occupied a good position in society, penal servitude is a punishment really worse than hanging.

“I am, dear sir,

“Your obedient servant,

“JEREMIAH LEWIN.”

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## SOMETHING VERY STRANGE.

Excited though George was, the bad taste of some parts of Lewin's letter did not escape his attention; but that troubled him little. "It is only a criminal lawyer's letter," was his mental comment. "What can you expect?"

Conroy was dying and Evelyn would be free. These were facts compared with which everything else sank into insignificance.

Yet, when he had somewhat composed himself and considered the matter more calmly, his satisfaction was less complete than it had been at the first blush. He had not the least pity for Conroy, looking on him—rather unreasonably—as his own personal enemy, one who had done him a cruel wrong, and whose death would remove an otherwise irremovable hindrance to the consummation of his hopes. If the "villain," as George always called him in his mind, had died at once, either of consumption or anything else, he would not have wasted another thought on him; but to hear of a fellow-creature being stricken with a mortal malady, and feel delighted thereat, was not quite what it ought to be. It fretted him, it seemed almost ignoble, that he should be waiting for this convicted felon to die, in order that he might step into his shoes; and half-an-hour after he had received the news of Conroy's illness so exultingly, he found himself wishing that he had heard nothing of it until the man was actually dead. Then his satisfaction would have been without alloy.

Should he tell Evelyn? That was the question which

next presented itself for consideration, and he had pondered it for some time without being able to come to a decision on the point, when the door opened and Ali announced Mrs. Minton.

"You are looking better, George," she said, "or rather not quite so ill. Do you feel so? And what says the doctor?"

"Yes, you look better," she went on, after he had answered her questions, "and I am glad that you feel so. But you still look very thoughtful and anxious, as if—to speak plainly—there was something on your mind. Now, I don't mean to say I am not curious—I might as well say that I am not a woman, or try to make you believe I am an angel—which no woman is, let poets say what they will. All the same, I don't want to pry into your secrets—if you have any. But I do want to see you well, and it is sometimes a relief to open your mind to a friend. It might be a comfort to you. True, I am not a man, and I know there are things that men don't like to confide, even to their sisters. Yet, in one respect, at least, I rise superior to my sex—I can keep a secret; neither am I so easily shocked as most women are, or pretend to be. I know too well how weak and foolish, and worse, men can be."

"You are as rough on our sex as on your own," said George, who felt almost amused.

"I am a married woman," said Mary, grimly.

George reflected. Why shouldn't he confide in Mary? Now that Conroy was going to die, there was no longer the same motive for absolute secrecy as there had been when his hope of marrying Evelyn seemed so very remote. To

share his secret with somebody would be a comfort ; Mary was shrewd, her counsel might be useful.

Not thus would he have argued in the plenitude of his strength, but now—— Yes, he would tell her. And he did—everything ; ending by putting to her the question which he had just put to himself.

“ I half-guessed as much. Men generally do take love badly when they get to your time of life ; but I did not think you could be so soft as to make yourself seriously ill about any woman—poor old man !” said Mary, compassionately.

“ I have not made myself ill about a woman,” protested George, who did not find being called soft and old particularly soothing to his feelings. “ I admit that I have been extremely anxious, that Evelyn is very dear to me, but I deny that this is the cause of my illness. If it were, how could a mutton chop make me feel so much better ? Tell me that.”

“ Well, well. You need not be angry, and I am sure I have no right to reproach anybody with being soft. I am softness itself. And I will say this : if you must marry, you could not give your love to anybody more worthy of it, or less likely to make you miserable, than Evelyn Waters. It is certainly rather awkward that she is another man’s wife, but as you did not know it at first, I cannot blame you, and his death would simplify matters amazingly. But don’t think to deceive me. Confess now. It is this letter much more than Dr. Mostyn’s tonic, which has so miraculously restored your appetite.”

“ I assure you, Mary,” said George, indignantly, “ that I

ate the chop before I read the letter. But never mind that. Shall I tell her? That is the present question."

"Certainly not."

"Why?"

"Because there is nothing to be gained by agitating her mind—possibly encouraging her with false hopes," Mary was going to say, but thinking better of it, she refrained. "You must remember that she has romantic notions of duty, and that this man is her husband, after all. How do you know that if she heard he was in danger she would not think it her duty to visit him?"

"I am sure she would do nothing of the sort. The villain has no claim on her whatever; and I think I ought to tell her. However, there is no need to decide to-day. I will think about it. She must be very unhappy, poor soul, and I have no right to keep back anything that might give her hope—— But never mind that now—— We are a pair of unfortunates, you and I. I suppose you haven't heard anything of Harold, yet?"

"What would you say if I told you that he had come back and is this moment at Wild Roses?"

"I should say—— But you are joking—— You surely don't mean——"

"I do, though. I mean that my poor boy has returned to me." Here her eyes filled with tears.

"And I suppose you received him with open arms?"

"Of course. Didn't I say just now that I am almost softer than you, and if you can tell me how anybody can be softer than that, I shall be very much obliged. There is only one thing I cannot forgive him,"

"Really. And what is that, pray?"

"Nearly frightening me to death last night. He glided in a ghost-like fashion across a glade of the forest, as Lucy and I were driving home, and vanished mysteriously among the trees; and I have heard so many stories about people's wraiths and doubles appearing—or appearing to appear—to their relatives and friends at the time of their deaths, that I quite thought my worst forebodings were realised, and I had rather a bad time of it. But Lucy Pemberton, who is of a very practical turn of mind, persuaded me to take a walk in the forest this morning, and there I met him."

"In the flesh?"

"Of course. What use would he be out of it? Just fancy! He had been staying at The Owl—that little inn, you know—not daring to show up."

"At The Owl?"

"I know what you are thinking. But he does not drink a drop of anything stronger than tea—and won't—he has taken the pledge."

"I am not given to be over-sanguine," continued Mary, after a short pause, "but I believe he will be staunch this time. I do, indeed. He seems quite another man, and has actually brought back more money than he took away. What do you think of that?"

"The deuce he has! But where has he been all this time?"

"According to what he tells me—he has always a very vague recollection of what befalls him when he is on the loose—he fell in with a friend shortly after he took my money—a congenial spirit. I know him; he isn't an oc-

casional drunkard, like Harold, but a confirmed toper. Well, this man took him to dine at his club—you may imagine how they dined. The next day they went to New-market and elsewhere, then to Liverpool races. What took place there I cannot make out. Harold thinks that he betted, and both won and lost money ; but on the whole he must have won—considerably. Then there was a row ; unless I am mistaken, something like a free fight. Anyhow, several of them were taken into custody on a charge of being drunk and disorderly and assaulting the police.”

“ Oh ! he remembers that, does he ? ”

“ He remembers the charge being read over to him next morning, when he had been sobered by a night in the police cells, and he had good cause to remember, for it was then that he did the most sensible thing in his life—I tell him the only sensible thing. The magistrate fined him five pounds and costs ; in default of payment to go to prison for a month. When he heard this, Harold begged that he might not have the option of a fine. ‘ If you let me go now,’ he said, ‘ I shall lose all my money and get into more trouble. Lock me up for a month, and the fit will be off. A month’s imprisonment is just what I need, and less than I deserve ! ’ The magistrate took him at his word and gave him a month, without the option of a fine. He says it did him all the good in the world. The enforced leisure gave him opportunity for reflection and repentance, whilst the prison diet and discipline restored his body to its normal condition. When he went out he was taken in hand by some religious people—Crusaders, I think—I haven’t got to know all from him yet—it comes out bit by bit. But one

thing is clear, he is a changed man. He seems to be under a new set of motives. He says very little—only that, with God's help, he hopes never to touch drink again. He has never acted so before—does not make excuses and talk about being a victim of dipsomania, or having two natures, as he used to do. That is what encourages me so much. I know what you will think; I know what everybody will think. But don't tell me you have no faith in him. Wait till you see him, and then you will be able to judge for yourself."

It would have been cruel to dash Mary's new-born hopes by expressing the doubts which it was impossible not to entertain, so George said that he hoped—felt almost sure, indeed—that her anticipations would be realised and Harold become all she could wish.

On this Mary brightened up wonderfully.

"He wants to see you and ask your forgiveness, but is afraid that after what has happened you may not care to see him."

"On the contrary, I shall be glad to see him—on condition, however, that he says nothing about forgiveness," answered George. "If you forgive him, that is surely enough, for it was your money he took, not mine."

"Perhaps better wait until you come to Wild Roses. I do not think I should like him to come here. Yet, if he could do you any good—professionally, I mean—I would bring him, all the same. But now that you are getting better so nicely I don't think there is any need. Do you think you will carry out that idea we discussed the other day? Coming to Wild Roses, I mean. The Pembertons can give you pleasant rooms and put up your horses. You

could have your own groom, too, and altogether you would be more independent and, I should say, more at home than you are here."

"I daresay you are quite right, Mary. And—yes, I think I should like it. But there are difficulties in the way."

"What difficulties?"

"They are all so very kind—Rufine particularly. She reads to me, and when Ali is not about gives me my medicine, anticipates my wishes, does everything she can for me, in fact."

"No doubt. But for all that she is not sincere, George."

"So you have said before and so I have thought. But really, it has seemed to me, the last few days, that she is sincere. Anyhow, she is very kind, and I should not like to break with her openly. If I do go to Wild Roses, and I almost think I had better—if I do go it must be managed."

"Managed! What do you mean?"

"I mean that I should not like to tell Peter and Rufine that I was going to change my quarters. I would go first of all to the seaside—Brighton or Bournemouth, or one of those places—and then write and say that, having decided to stay another year in England, I had taken rooms at Wild Roses for the hunting season; it would be more convenient to be where my horses are."

"Well, George, you have changed!" exclaimed Mary. "As much for the worse as Harold has changed for the better," she would have said, if she had completed the sentence and spoken all her mind.

"I know it, Mary. I know it. I am becoming as infirm

in purpose as I am weak in body. However, if I can eat a few more chops and sleep as I slept last night . . .

It is very kind of you to come and see me, Mary. Your visits always do me good. But you have not seen much of Harold yet, and if you would rather stay with him to-morrow——”

“Very well, I will stay with him to-morrow. You are better, and as Rufine is so kind and so faithful, you can do without me, at any rate for a few days.”

George had spoken without *arrière pensée*, but Mary, irritated by his absurd fear of offending Rufine—as she deemed it—chose to see in the observation a hint that her visits were more frequent than welcome, while he, a little huffed in turn, and unequal to the exertion of a long talk, made no effort to put her right. So it came to pass that sister and brother, for the first time in their lives, took cold leave of each other.

“He is quite under that woman’s thumb,” said Mary to herself, as she went away. “He will not be able to call his soul his own, soon. The idea of George Brandon, who used not to care a button for anybody, not daring to change his quarters without resorting to a subterfuge ! And when it comes to the point he will not leave, or, if he does, he will let her go with him. But what can one do? Where find an antidote for the bane? Miss Waters ! If that wretched husband of hers would only get done with his dying, we should soon upset Mrs. Peter’s apple-cart. Well, I must hope for the best.”

As it happened, she did not see Rufine—probably because Rufine did not want to see her—perhaps fortunately,

as Harold suggested when she got home. "You might have had words," he said.

"I think that is very likely," was Mary's answer; "at any rate, if we had met as I was going away, for I did not feel in the best of tempers just then. Yes, it is perhaps as well I did not see her. And I shall be in no hurry to go again. There will be no need. If Conroy dies, and he is in a fair way for it, I think, George will be sure to get better."

"In the other event?"

"That would be too awful. I think it would kill him."

For three days Mary was as good as her word, but on the fourth she began to waver, and her mind was ill at ease. George had said nothing at which she had a right to take offence, and though he could not muster up courage to leave Fairmead, that was no reason why she should keep away from him, or act as if "out of sight" were "out of mind." He was better, of course, for "no news is good news," and she had not heard a word since she was last at The Cottage. All the same, it would be more satisfactory to see him, and know that he really was better. On the fifth day, anxiety and suspense utterly vanquishing her wavering resolution, she asked Lucy Pemberton to drive her once more across the forest to Fairmead.

On the way thither they met Ned, riding Cock Robin.

"Well met," said the young fellow. I was coming for you."

"You don't mean that—that——" gasped Mary, with a sickening sense of apprehension that almost deprived her of the power of utterance.

"No, no. George is not dead. But he is worse, and unless something is done, I fear he soon will be."

"What can be done?" What do you think should be done?"

"Well, I don't think Dr. Mostyn quite understands the case. Indeed, he admits as much, and I want to have somebody down from London. Mrs. Brandon proposes to dismiss Mostyn and call in Sandford. But that would do no good whatever. Sandford is an old duffer, and Mrs. Brandon and I have had words—to put it plainly, something like a quarrel—and, as my father shallies about it, and evidently shrinks from the responsibility of a decision, I thought I would get you to come over again. You are quite as much entitled to have your say as Mrs. Brandon."

"Of course I am. And look here! My husband is the cleverest doctor I know; if it had not been for his unhappy propensity he would now be one of the most rising medical men in London. But he is all right at present. Do you think Mostyn would meet him in consultation?"

"I am sure he would. He said only yesterday that he should like us to call in somebody else. I daresay, though, Mrs. Brandon will have something to say."

"Never mind Mrs. Brandon. Compared with my brother's life, her wishes don't weigh a feather in the balance. Now, look here, Ned! I will go straight on to your house and see George, while you ride round by Dr. Mostyn's surgery and ask him to make an appointment to meet your Uncle Harold later on. Then you will perhaps be good enough to take a cab and fetch him. Leave me to

deal with your step-mother. I take all the responsibility. Will you?"

"Certainly, Aunt Mary. I will take the near cut by the Green Ride, see Mostyn, order the cab, then gallop over to Wild Roses to apprise Uncle Harold, and unless I am much mistaken you will have both doctors at The Cottage in less than two hours."

With that, Ned turned his horse round, jumped him over the ditch by the roadside, doubled a promontory of beech trees, and the next moment was lost to view.

"Give Flirt a touch of the whip, Lucy, dear," said Mary "If we would save poor George's life, we have no time to lose. There is something very strange in all this."

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### PUZZLED.

GEORGE was in his sitting-room, which adjoined his bedroom. He lay on a sofa, wrapped in an Indian dressing-gown. Though now so weak that he could not move without help, he absolutely refused to remain in bed.

Mary had been painfully surprised by the change in his looks the previous week, but the further change which a few more days had wrought simply appalled her. His pinched nose, hollow and hectic cheeks, and large, lustrous eyes, gave him the appearance of a person far gone in consumption; and, worst sign of all, his voice was failing; he could raise it little above a whisper.

In the room with him were Rufine and Ali. The Indian's face was fixed and stern, and there was an expression in

those strange eyes of his that Mary had never seen before : an expression half-furtive, half-wistful, as if he were both thinking deeply and watching keenly at the same time. He stood at the foot of his master's couch, like a soldier on guard, and, except for the movement of his eyes and his salaam to Mary as she entered, as still as a statue.

Rufine, too, looked different from usual. Her face wore a look of anxiety and apprehension, and the dark lines under her eyes showed that she had either been sleeping badly or suffering from headache.

When Mary came in, she rose and greeted her sister-in-law with seeming cordiality.

"George has just been saying that he thought you had forgotten him," she said.

Simple words and quietly spoken, but there was a bitter meaning in them, and as Mary kissed her brother a hot tear fell on his cheek. For five days, and for a paltry motive, she had left him in sole charge of a woman whom she had always hated, and of a foreign servant whom she had latterly begun to distrust, and George was doubtless even now contrasting her neglect with Rufine's devotion.

"I am so sorry," she murmured. "I felt quite sure you were better, or I would have come again the next day. I had no idea—— We expected you would be over at Wild Roses before this. You have had a relapse."

"I don't know about a relapse. I began to be worse again the day after you were here, and I think I have got worse ever since. I cannot eat. I take nothing but brandy and beef tea, and my nights are so bad that Mostyn has had to give me morphine."

Another bad sign. Mary knew that when doctors prescribe brandy, beef tea, and morphine, they are getting to the end of their resources—probably making a last desperate effort to prolong life on the off-chance of effecting a cure.

"I suffer most at nights," went on George, faintly. "I have horrible dreams—wake screaming and bathed in perspiration. If I had been a drinking man I should almost think I had got *del. tre.*"

"Harold is coming to see you—professionally, I mean. He will, perhaps, be able to do you good. You have no objection, I suppose," she whispered, taking his hand.

"To the good," he answered, with a wan smile, "of course not. Let him come by all means. I want to get better—must get better—and see her."

"Have you had any more news?"

"This morning—Conroy is worse, dying!"

"What a strange dispensation it would be," thought Mary, "if the man to whom Evelyn is married and the man whom she loves, should die at the same time, or within a few days of each other!"

For she could not conceal from herself that George was in a very bad way. Here was no case of disappointed love, and she blamed herself for having entertained so absurd an idea. The cause of the trouble was obviously physical. She feared there was some deep-seated organic disease, and awaited her husband's verdict with intense anxiety. His *forte* was diagnosis, and she knew that he would tell her the truth. She wanted to say something cheerful, but the words of hope she tried to speak seemed to stick in her throat. Fortunately, George did not appear inclined for conversa-

tion. Talking wearied him, and he wanted nothing more than to lie quiet with Mary's hand in his.

After a while, Rufine, who had heard nothing of their conversation, rose from her chair, and coming to the sofa asked George whether she could do anything for him, and, on receiving a negative answer, left the room.

Mary followed her.

"You find him worse," said Rufine, when they were outside.

"Very much."

"If I had been listened to, he would have been better. You should have sent for Sandford. I said from the first that Mostyn did not understand the case. His treatment is quite wrong, and if it is continued George will die."

"I don't agree with your estimate of either Sandford or Mostyn. However, Harold will be here shortly. I have arranged for him to hold a consultation with Mostyn."

"You have! I think you might have spoken to me before taking such a step. It was the least you could do. Remember, George is my guest."

"But he is my brother."

"Yes; and you have not been near him for five days."

Mary bent her head—the reproach was merited.

"I thought he was better," was all she could say.

"You might have taken steps to make sure. However, let your husband come. I am sure I have no objection. He was once supposed to be clever, I believe; but if he succeeds in curing George, I shall be very much surprised. *Au revoir.* I must go to my little boy. He is suffering from a bad cold."

Mary returned to the sick-room with a sense of humiliation. This time, at least, Rufine had got the better of her.

Ali still remained in the same statuesque attitude, but after Rufine's departure the sternness of his features somewhat relaxed, and when the clock struck four he intimated that it was time for the sahib to take his medicine, and gave him a dose from a graduated bottle which stood on the mantelpiece. This left the bottle about two-thirds full, and Mary noticed that Ali furtively counted with his finger the number of lines above the top of the liquid, a mysterious proceeding, the meaning of which she tried in vain to fathom.

George spoke only occasionally, lying, for the most part, with closed eyes.

"I am best quiet," he said ; "talking tires me, and the mere effort to think, or sustain a conversation, makes my head go round, and I feel as if I were in a dream."

After an interval, which, in Mary's excited state, appeared intolerably long, the sound of wheels was heard in the avenue.

"They are here!" she said, going to the window ; "Mostyn and Harold."

A few minutes later they appeared in the room, followed by Rufine, who seemed disposed to stay and take part in the consultation, and it was only when Mary suggested that they had better leave the doctors to themselves that she made a move.

"Where will you go?" she asked, abruptly. "I suppose, like me, you are anxious to know what they have to say?"

"Very. I will go where you like."

"Come into the nursery, then. They will have to pass that way, and we can intercept them as they go past. I want you to tell me what you think about my child. You also are a mother."

Mary did not think there was much the matter with little George, anything more serious than a slight cold and a touch of fever, but if it had been the plague, Rufine could hardly have shown more concern. Mary recommended a pack, to be followed up with a dose of magnesia.

"You think that will do him good?"

"I am sure."

"Will you help me? It is rather a delicate operation, packing a little child. I never did it before."

Rufine, who a few minutes before had been cold and sneering, was now all tenderness. As she caressed her child, her face so softened with motherly love that she looked like another woman, and she thanked her sister-in-law gracefully and earnestly for her help.

"I have been mistaken in her," thought Mary. "She has a heart after all. It is as George said, a good mother cannot be a bad woman."

By the time the boy was comfortably enveloped in his pack, the sound of footsteps in the corridor told them that the consultation was over, and the two women, leaving the nursery, followed the doctors downstairs, Rufine appearing, if possible, more anxious than Mary to hear what they had to say.

Minton, as the senior, answered their questions.

"George is very ill," he said, gravely; "there can be no two opinions about that, and the cause is decidedly obscure;

there are symptoms which differentiate his illness from any which either Dr. Mostyn or myself have seen before. It is no ordinary case, and I need hardly say, a very anxious one. I fully approve of Dr. Mostyn's treatment, he has done everything that could be done ;"—here Rufine smiled sarcastically—"he has done everything that could be done, but we have decided to try something else."

"By way of experiment?" asked Rufine.

"The treatment of an obscure disease must always be more or less in the nature of an experiment. Dr. Mostyn will go at once to his surgery and prepare another mixture, which Ali must fetch. I shall stay and watch our patient for an hour or two—our examination has been rather brief. Dr. Mostyn will make another visit this evening, and I shall be here again in the morning."

"Do you think there is any immediate danger?" inquired Mary, addressing Mostyn.

"Not immediate. Mr. Brandon has a wonderful constitution, and we still hope for the best. But unless there is a decided change within the next day or two, I fear——"

"I understand. You fear the worst."

Later in the evening, after seeing George take the first dose of his new medicine, Minton drove home with his wife and Lucy Pemberton. They were hardly under way when Mary began to question him.

"Now, tell me the truth, Harold ; the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I know you doctors never do so if you can help it. But try for once, if only out of pity for me. Will my brother get better?"

"That is more than I am able to say. I profess

medicine, not prophecy. And, as I said, the disease is very obscure. I have not only never seen, I have never read of anything exactly like it before. But I am very much afraid that unless the new treatment we are trying produces a marked change, George will—not get better.”

“It is a new treatment, not merely a modification of the old?”

“Quite. The old was quite right according to theory, but as it has produced no positive result—though Mostyn says there was a decided rally and recovery of strength last week—we are bound to try something else.”

“When should the marked change you speak of begin to show?”

“In twenty-four hours, or less.”

“Then by to-morrow night at this time we shall know whether he will live or die?”

“I would not go so far as to say that,” said Harold, cautiously. “‘While there is life there is hope,’ is not merely a popular saying. It embodies a truth which physicians themselves too often forget; and I perhaps went too far just now. There is nothing organically wrong with George. I never saw a sounder man. He has really no business to be ill, much less to die.”

But Mary refused to be comforted. Less sanguine than her husband, she looked on George’s recovery as almost past hoping for, and, bending her head, wept long and silently.

When they got home, Lucy Pemberton wrote a letter to Evelyn Waters, in which, after mentioning several other matters, she added, in the inevitable postscript—

"You will be sorry to hear that Mr. Brandon, who a few days ago—as I informed you at the time—seemed to be in a fair way for recovery, is very much worse, and it is doubtful whether he will get better."

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## CHAPTER XXIX:

### ALI'S DISCOVERY.

HAROLD MINTON rose next morning shortly after five.

"Why are you getting up so early?" asked his wife. "Breakfast won't be ready for two hours or more."

"I am going to Fairmead. I have been thinking about George all night, and the more I think the more puzzled I become. I want to see whether the new treatment is beginning to show any result. If not, I think I shall see what a homœopathic dose of strychnine will do. Much, however, depends on the sort of night he has passed, and the sooner I am on the spot the better."

"By all means go, then. You will find Mr. Pemberton about. He will let you take Flirt."

"I would rather walk. I may have to stay there the greater part of the day. It is a case that wants careful watching, and fortunately, or unfortunately, I have nothing else to do."

"That is perhaps the best. You can walk it in an hour-and-a-half, and Lucy and I will drive over after breakfast. If you cure him, Harold, I shall consider myself repaid a hundred-fold for all I have suffered."

"God bless you and him, Mary! Without His help nothing I can do will avail. I did not think so once, and

so long as I depended on my own strength—— However, we will not talk about that now. I shall expect you towards ten o'clock."

A brisk walk of ninety minutes, by the fields and through the forest, brought Harold within sight of The Cottage, and he saw with a sense of indescribable relief that the windows of George's room were slightly open and the blinds up. Even had they been down at that time in the morning he would not have drawn an unfavourable inference, but their being up showed that his patient still lived, and though he did not expect to find him dead, George was in so precarious a state that Minton would not have been surprised if he had passed away with the dawn—the time when death reaps his richest harvest. It was this fear more than anything else that had caused him to hurry away from Wild Roses at so early an hour.

Harold entered the garden by a side door, which led to the shrubbery, and made a short cut to the house. As he closed the door behind him, he heard a rustle in the bushes, and the next moment Ali stood before him in the path.

"Salaam, sahib!" said the Indian, gravely; "I want much to speak to you. It is of great importance. But we must not be seen. If you will come this way——"

"Your master! Is he better or worse?" asked Harold, as he followed the man in a state of considerable surprise.

"The sahib is not worse. He sleeps. Know you why he ill, why the *hakim's* drugs do him no good, and why death has him in his grip?"

"No. I wish I did. It is what I am trying to find out."

"I will tell you. See you this bottle?"

And with that Ali took from his pocket the mixture which had been prepared for George the day before.

"Here are ten lines,"—counting.

"Yes, it is a graduated bottle. Every line marks a dose, —one to be given every four hours, as I told you, and as it is written on this label."

"True, Ali can read. Well, at seven o'clock you gave him the first dose. At eleven I gave him the second. That left still three doses, the third to be given at three o'clock this morning. After the second dose, my master said he felt disposed to sleep, and told me I might sleep, and as I had slept not at all the night before, I lay down on the sofa near his bed, first fastening a cord to my hand and placing the end on his pillow, so that he might waken me when he would. But I wakened first, and knowing that it was time for the third dose, I took up the bottle, when lo! the quantity had increased. Instead of three doses it contained four."

"What made you think of counting the lines?" asked Minton, sharply.

"When the Mem Sahib was here last week, my master was much, very much better. My heart grew light; I thought he would soon again be strong. But when the *hakim's* medicine seemed to make him worse, I thought it was bad medicine, and I wanted it to be finished. Three days since I began to count the lines after every dose, and three times I have found, as now, that the quantity, instead of going less, has got more."

"Did you give him any more—after the second dose, I mean?"

"No."

"You did quite right. Who has access to the room besides yourself?"

"Everybody."

"But you are always there."

"Nearly always. But the sahib sometimes sends me on an errand, and sometimes I sleep."

"Give me the bottle."

Ali hesitated.

"If anybody comes in and sees not the bottle, or my master asks for his medicine, what shall I say?"

"You are right. Who is likely to come in within the next half-hour or so?"

"Missy Brandon generally looks in about half-past eight to ask how he has passed the night, sometimes alone, sometimes with Sahib Brandon. Sahib Ned also comes."

"Well, look here. Return to your post at once, and in half-an-hour I will be back with this bottle—or another like it. If anybody comes in the meantime—before I get back—you must make some excuse not to let them in. You can easily do that. Mr. Brandon may be still asleep. That would be quite a sufficient excuse."

"And if he is not, I can say so," said Ali, with an expressive grimace.

"Exactly. You can say he is asleep, or has only just wakened—anything, in fact. Has anybody seen me, do you think?"

"I saw you from the window. But no other blind is up on this side of the house, and all the servants sleep on the other. No, I do not think anybody has seen you."

"Expect me in half-an-hour. But stay! If I ask you a leading question before anybody — any member of the family, for instance—thus: 'I suppose you gave Mr. Brandon a third dose at three o'clock?' be sure you say 'Yes.' Do you understand?"

"Quite."

"And you know how to keep a still tongue, I hope. Not a word of this to anybody, mind."

"Ali is neither a woman nor a child," was the indignant response, and without another word he turned on his heel and disappeared in the shrubbery.

Minton retraced his steps, and keeping close to the wall to avoid being seen, set off at a run in the direction of his colleague's house.

"If somebody has been tampering with the medicine," he thought, "that will account for a good deal—perhaps everything. It looks like a case of slow poisoning—but what is the poison, and who is the culprit? One thing, at least, is certain—it must be somebody in the house. The servants may be dismissed from consideration at once. Ned? No, it cannot be Ned. Peter? No, Peter is a cad, and not very scrupulous in money matters, yet I do not think he is such a villain as to poison his own brother; and even if he were quite disposed to put him out of the way, he would be too much afraid of the consequences to make the attempt. Rufine? Ali? It must be one of those two. Which? That is what I have to ascertain. But the first thing to find out is whether poison has been used, and of what nature. I can think of none that produces all these effects. But, then, I have been out of the swim lately, and there may be

some new toxic agent I know nothing of, and more than one drug may have been used. However, I have the means of unlocking the secret in this bottle—unless that Indian is playing me false.”

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## CHAPTER XXX.

### A CONSULTATION.

A FEW words served to inform Mostyn—who had just come downstairs—of what had happened, and what Harold proposed to do.

Mostyn did not seem so much surprised as might have been expected.

“I have had a vague suspicion the last two or three days—since the relapse, in fact—that something queer was going on,” he said. “But the grounds were so slight that I could take no action. I could not even make sure that the symptoms were not entirely due to natural causes. But this tampering with the mixture looks ugly. Who? However, this is no time for discussion. The thing is to empty the mixture into another bottle, replace it with the right stuff, and let us get back as quickly as possible. We must have a talk later.”

“Yes, come up in an hour or so. We can then have a formal consultation, and afterwards leave the house together, intercept my wife as she comes from Wild Roses, have a further talk here, and decide what is to be done; for it is quite clear that if we would save our man alive, something must be done, and that quickly. You will be very careful of that bottle. Yes, lock it up. Now a cork in the other.

Good-bye for the present. I should like to get back before the bottle is missed."

In this object Harold succeeded—by the skin of his teeth. The door of The Cottage being, as was usual at that hour, open, he entered without ringing. "Good-morning," he said to the maid who was sweeping the hall, then ran upstairs, and, reaching George's room a moment or two before George awoke, contrived to put the bottle in its wonted place before its absence was remarked.

George felt rather better, he said—thought he had slept two or three hours.

"Two or three hours! Why, you have slept nearly all night, Ali tells me! Not wakened since he gave you your medicine about three o'clock."

"I do not remember that at all."

"Very likely. Shows how sleepy you must have been. Your pulse is firmer, your mouth less dry—there is secretion of saliva again. You must try to eat some solid food. Yes, there is decided, though as yet little, improvement. If we can only keep it up, we shall soon have you all right again. Not beef tea this morning. Ali! A glass of new milk. Fetch it yourself from the kitchen."

In a few minutes Ali returned, followed at a short interval by Rufine.

"You here already!" she exclaimed, on seeing Minton.

"Yes, I woke early, and, as it was a fine morning, I thought I would walk over before breakfast!"

"How do you find your patient?"

"Better."

"I am very glad. You think your medicine has done him good, then?"

"I do think so."

"When did he have it last?"—casting a quick glance at the bottle.

"Four or five hours ago, I fancy. You gave Mr. Brandon his medicine at three o'clock, I think you were saying, Ali?"

"Yes, sir."

"Not since? But is it not time he had another portion?"

"He has just had his breakfast, which this morning was a glass of milk. In a quarter-of-an-hour, Ali, you can give him his medicine."

"Yes, sir."

On this, Rufine, who looked anxious and, as Minton thought, ill at ease, asked him to breakfast. Downstairs were Peter and his son, both of whom made particular inquiries about George, but Ned appeared much the more anxious, and declared that until his uncle was either better or worse he should not return to Manchester.

"As you like," observed his father, rather surlily, "but I really don't see what good you can do by staying."

"I wish I could. I shall stay for my own satisfaction and out of the love I have for Uncle George. He has been so kind to us all that it would be simply infamous not to show him all possible sympathy."

"Yes," murmured Rufine, "he has been very good. It would be such an affliction if he should not recover."

Peter said nothing, but it may possibly have crossed his mind that the hundred thousand pounds or so, at which he

estimated his share of George's fortune, would enable him to bear with resignation the blow which his son and his wife seemed so much to dread.

A little later came Mostyn, and the two doctors, after making a careful examination of their patient, and giving full directions as to his diet and the rest, went out together, and walked, earnestly talking the while, towards Wild Roses. They had not gone far when they met Mrs. Minton and Miss Pemberton.

"George is a little better," said Harold, anticipating his wife's inquiry. "I think we shall be able to pull him through, after all."

"Thank God for that!"

"But something very strange has happened. Drive round by Dr. Mostyn's house. We must have a general consultation before I leave."

"Leave! Where are you going?"

"To town, by the next train."

"What on earth for?"

"You will hear directly. Drive on," said Harold, as he and his companion got into the back seat of the phaeton."

In a few minutes they were at Mostyn's house, and in a few minutes more Mary knew all that her husband had to tell.

"Now, what do you think?" he asked. "Who is the culprit?"

"Supposing it to be a case of poisoning?"

"Supposing it to be a case of poisoning. And I am more than ever convinced that it is. George is decidedly

better this morning, and the improvement is much more likely to be due to the fact that he has taken no more poison since yesterday than to our physic. What say you, Mostyn?"

"I am quite of your opinion. I think, too, the toxic agent used is some subtle narcotic."

"That looks as if it were the Indian."

"But if so, why should he say anything about it?"

"Well, the motive does not seem very obvious," said Harold, "but is it not conceivable that he may want to implicate somebody else, either out of revenge or to prevent suspicion falling on himself?"

"It is possible; such things have happened," said Mostyn, thoughtfully. "But no, I don't think Ali is the poisoner. He is too fond of his master to put him to death by inches. I never saw a more devoted servant. Why, he nurses him like a woman; watches over him day and night. What could be his motive?"

"Mayn't he have robbed George, and want to put him out of the way for fear of being found out?"

"And I am sure he looks quite capable of committing murder," put in Mary, who had a vague idea that a dark skin was generally associated with a black mind.

"Looks are nothing; we want facts," said Harold. "Well, to tell the truth, I don't think Ali is the culprit. On the other hand, I don't like to think it is Rufine."

"Neither do I, if only because we have never been really friends. It is a terrible thing to suggest that anybody—even an enemy—is guilty of murder; and I have rather changed my opinion about her the last day or two. I

thought her fondness for that child was a good deal make-believe, but I am sure now that it is real."

"That is nothing to the purpose, Mary. It is quite possible to love one person and hate another. You are reluctant to face the point at issue, and I don't wonder. Would Rufine gain by George's death or not?"

"I suppose the family would, if he left them anything. So should we."

"Exactly; and if George had fallen ill in our house of an obscure disease, under similar circumstances, you may be sure that Peter and Rufine would have had something very unpleasant to say about us. And we do know that Rufine has some knowledge of drugs, and keeps a medicine chest. However, we are not sitting as a court of criminal inquiry. What we have to do now is to find out whether there is poison in this bottle or not, and, in the meantime, protect our patient from further harm. I think he is safe for to-day. We have given orders that he has to have no more medicine of any sort for the present, that he has to drink only milk, fresh from the cow, and Appolinaris water, and eat, if he can eat, nothing but lightly boiled eggs. I don't think poison will easily be introduced into them; and as for the Appolinaris water, we have given Ali strict orders that a fresh bottle must be opened every time George wants to drink."

"All very well, supposing Ali is not the man."

"I don't think he is; and he would be a fool to play any hanky-panky tricks the very day he has put us on the *qui vive*. And now I am going with this bottle to old Dr. Meirstein. Besides being a clever analyst, he knows more

about poisons than any other man in Europe, and is well up in therapeutics and medical jurisprudence."

"And then?"

"Well, if we find that George is being slowly poisoned, or have good reason to believe that he is, we must get him out of Peter's house forthwith, and as quietly as possible. It would never do to have a scandal. None of us want anything of this to get into the papers."

"And I am sure George would not like it. Will you tell him?"

"Not now, certainly. His nervous system is completely unstrung; he could not bear it. We must get him away first."

"And Rufine; shall you say anything to her?"

"That depends entirely on circumstances and the result of Meirstein's analysis. There is always the off-chance that George has not been poisoned at all; and as yet, remember, we have not a tittle of evidence against Rufine or anybody else."

"I almost wish we never may have," said Mary, sadly. "It would be too awful. I should have to think worse of my sex than ever. If there must be a culprit I would much rather it might turn out to be Ali than Rufine, if only for the sake of poor old Peter and the children."

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

### A NOCTURNAL VISITOR.

DR. MEIRSTEIN was a little, black-eyed, hook-nosed German Jew. He had long ceased to practise medicine, and devoted

himself exclusively to experimental research. Minton found him in his shirt-sleeves, his portly form enveloped in a big apron, hard at work in a large room, which was quite as much a laboratory as a study.

"*Ach Gott!* This is very interesting," he exclaimed, after Harold had made his statement. "You are quite right; it does indeed look like a case of secret poisoning, and by an operator who knows his business, which happens very seldom. Your amateur murderer is nearly always a great blockhead, and knows nothing whatever of science. Now for an examination of this bottle. We know what it contained originally, and approximately, how much is supposed to have been added by our secret poisoner; so it will be enough, for the moment, to ascertain—if we can—the nature of the toxic agent which has been introduced into your patient's mixture."

After this there was an interval of silence, during which the Doctor tested in various ways a part of the contents of the bottle, and did a good deal of weighing and measuring, made calculations, and consulted several books.

"You are right," he said at length, "the bottle contains a narcotic poison. Your colleague is also right in thinking that it is of the nature of a stimulating narcotic. All the same, there is not enough here to hurt anybody much."

"In repeated doses, though——"

"Oh, yes, repeated small doses, continued for some time, would unquestionably have a lethal effect. And you believe that its administration has been going on since several weeks.

No, it is neither opium nor nicotine, nor yet hashish. The pupils are dilated, you say; a tendency

to delirium, great apathy, no appetite; nearly all the symptoms, in fact, of acute dyspepsia. *Donnerwetter!* I will light my pipe. It may be that a little narcotic stimulant will help me to an idea. *Ach Gott!* It must be so. I can call to mind no agent that answers the tests, and at the same time would produce the symptoms you have described, but one——”

“And that is?”

“The dried leaf of *Erythroxylon coca*; or, more probably, its active principal, which I believe it is proposed to call cocaine, But the drug is so little known—hardly at all—and has not yet found its way into any pharmacopœia. Your secret poisoner must be very clever. It is an ingenious idea. When you find him out, be good enough to make him my respectful compliments, and then hand him over to the police. I shall, of course, make with the remains of the mixture some further trials; these I have already made rather are too crude to be absolutely conclusive, yet I think you may make up your mind that you have to do with a case of secret poisoning, and that the agent employed is cocaine. If the person you suspect has ever been in Peru, it might help you to a clue, for it is in Peru that the coca leaf is chewed both as a pleasure and as a temporary substitute for food, which means, of course, that it destroys appetite by benumbing the mucous membrane of the stomach.”

Minton had now put on his considering cap. There could no longer be any doubt as to which of the two suspects was the culprit. Ali could not possibly be conversant with the properties of cocaine. It must be Rufine.

What, then, was best to be done? Get George out of the house quietly, and say nothing more about the attempt on his life, and leave Rufine to her own devices? No, that would not do at all. George must know, and Rufine must be taught a lesson, if only to prevent her from trying to poison any other body; and Harold himself was extremely curious to know how she had become acquainted with the therapeutic properties of a substance whose very existence was at that time known only to scientific men. But how was he to go about it? If Rufine was openly taxed with the crime, she would no doubt deny it point blank, her husband would take her part, and there would be no end of a row. for actual proof against her there was none; and it was not in the least likely that she would either voluntarily confess or allow herself to be taken in the act. All that it seemed possible for Harold to do was to trust to the chapter of accidents and be careful not to act rashly. And he would consult his wife; she was a woman of resource, and possessed a ready wit.

As he had arranged with her and Mostyn, he returned direct to Fairmead after his interview with Dr. Meirstein. He found George better than he had expected; the effects of abstinence from cocaine, and of the food he had been able to take during the day, were obvious both in his face and manner, while a letter from Lewin, announcing the death of Conroy, had greatly improved his spirits.

"I have been a prisoner long enough," he said. "When can you let me go out? The fresh air would do me more good than all your physic."

"I believe it would; and the best thing would be to

get you away to the seaside at once. What do you say to starting to-morrow? You could have an invalid carriage and travel by easy stages."

"By all means. Will you make the necessary arrangements?"

"It is quite impossible. He is not fit to be moved," exclaimed Rufine, who had just entered the room. "See how weak he is! In a few days, perhaps, if the improvement continues and he still wants to go. But to remove him to-morrow—it would be sheer murder."

"Sheer murder! Oh, no! Removing him to a more bracing atmosphere would not be murder. It would be life. Yet to-morrow may be a little early, and it might not be easy to get an invalid carriage here in time; but the day after, with proper precautions, I think it would be quite safe. What say you, Dr. Mostyn?"

"I think with you. With proper care the journey may be safely undertaken, and a change of air is very desirable."

"I hope you don't think me ungrateful, Rufine, in wanting to leave you," said George. "I shall never forget your kindness. But I am not used to being laid up, and I feel that a sniff of sea air would do me all the good in the world."

"What is best for you will best please me," returned Rufine, with a rather forced smile, "only I am very much afraid that in your present weak state such a journey may do you great harm. But these gentlemen, of course, know better than I."

"Well," said Harold, as if he could not quite make up his mind, "we had perhaps better not decide finally until

to-morrow morning. Everything depends on the continuance of the improvement. If there should be anything like a relapse—— We shall see . . . Give him one dose of the mixture before he goes to bed, Ali, and one during the night, or whenever he wakens in the morning.”

But he had afterwards an opportunity of telling Ali not to give the second dose, and be on the alert for whatever might befall. It had occurred to him that Rufine might possibly try to ensure a relapse by sophisticating the mixture with cocaine, or even with a more rapid and potent poison.

As soon as the Mintons were gone, which was about nine o'clock, George took his medicine and went to bed.

“I am tired,” he said to Ali—as it happened, in Rufine’s hearing—“and you must be very sleepy. If I waken and want you I will pull the cord ; but I don’t think I shall. I feel like sleeping till daylight.”

But, sleepy or not, Ali contrived to keep awake, and he saw something that well repaid him for his pains. Towards midnight, the door was pushed slowly open, and a familiar voice uttered his name twice in a loud whisper ; then a scarlet-robed figure slipped noiselessly in, and after standing a few seconds in an attitude of attention, moved towards the mantelpiece, where, beside the flickering night-light, stood George’s medicine bottle. As the figure was now between himself and the mantelpiece, Ali could not see all that passed, but he could tell by the movement of the arms that something was being taken from inside the scarlet dressing-gown, and he heard a sound like the trickling of water ; the object was then returned to its receptacle, and the figure,

after again standing at attention, glided swiftly from the room, closing the door so warily that Ali could only just hear the click of the catch.

But the closing of the door did not, as on previous occasions of the same sort, close the incident.

A few minutes afterwards Ali got up, opened the door as quietly as it had been shut, and slipping out, crept along the passage with naked feet until he reached Mrs. Brandon's dressing-room, where, as he knew, she both unrobed and kept her knick-knacks.

A light streamed faintly from under the door, and Ali, putting his eye to the keyhole, was just in time to see Rufine throw the scarlet gown hurriedly on a sofa before she turned out the lamp and betook herself to her bedroom. For nearly an hour he waited outside, then pushing open the door, which Rufine had not fastened—probably from fear of making a noise, or out of sheer nervousness—he groped his way on hands and knees to the sofa, and without much difficulty found the object which he had seen her put into the pocket of her dressing-gown.

Ten minutes later the Indian was lying by his master's side fast asleep.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

### CONFESSION.

"THAT'S right !" said Minton, when he saw his patient next morning. " You have slept well, drunk a pint of new milk, and now feel as if you could eat something more solid. Eat whatever you fancy, that is not absolutely indigestible. Ali

seems to have forgotten the second dose of medicine. Never mind. You are just as well without it. Nothing like the *vis medicatrix nature*, after all; fresh air and nourishing food."

"Fresh air! You will let me go out to-day, then? An ordinary carriage in which I could lean back would do, and then, perhaps, to-morrow——"

"A happy thought! Yes, you shall go out for an hour or so to-day, and if you stand it well, you may start for the seaside to-morrow."

"But I must make a call in London *en route*. I expect a letter. Did you post the letter I wrote yesterday, Ali?"

"Yes, sahib."

"You posted it yourself—with your own hands, I mean?"

"Yes, sahib."

"I may have an answer this afternoon," murmured George. "A knock at the door. See who it is, Ali."

It was the footman, who had come to say that Mr. Brandon would be glad if Dr. Minton would join him and Mr. Edward at breakfast.

"I shall be back shortly," he said, as he went away, "and Mary will be here at eleven."

In the breakfast-room Harold found father and son only. "Rufine is not very well," said Peter, after hearing his report about George, "she is having a cup of tea in her own room. The boy is out of sorts too, and she would like you to see him, if you would be so kind."

"Certainly, if you wish it, but I thought Sandford was the family doctor."

"Well, so he is—or rather has been. But as you are in

the house, Rufine thought it would not look nice—not be exactly the thing, you know—to call in anybody else.”

“She is very considerate, and I am very much obliged to her. I will look into the nursery as I go upstairs. I suppose it will do then, or shall I go now?”

“Oh! dear, no. I expect you will find it something very trifling. If Georgy’s finger aches she thinks he is going to have a fever. If he were any other body’s child she would dose him herself.”

“She is quite right,” said Harold, with a smile. “It is against rule to treat either yourself or members of your own family.”

Breakfast over, he went up to the nursery. Rufine was there, looking paler and more anxious and worried than he had ever seen her.

“She has missed the bottle,” he thought; “I wonder if it would be possible to surprise her secret.”

“They told you downstairs, I suppose, that I wanted to see you,” she said. “It is very kind of you to come. I was so glad to hear from Ali that George keeps better. I am suffering myself—a horrid *migraine*—and my poor little boy, he is far from well. Will you see him?”—rising—“he is in the next room. I thought it better to keep him in bed.”

Minton signified assent, and following Rufine into the night nursery, carefully examined his little patient, but beyond asking a few questions said not a word until they were back in the other room.

“What is it, Harold? Tell me at once,” she cried, with an alarmed look, for she saw by his manner that something very serious was the matter.

"Unless I am very much mistaken, the child is sickening for scarlet fever."

"Scarlet fever! Oh, *mon Dieu!* That is terrible. But he will get better; you can cure him. Tell me not that he will die—my beautiful boy. You are clever, save him, and there is nothing I will not do for you. Nothing."

"You could stop trying to poison poor George, for instance, and tell me what there is in this bottle,"—taking from his pocket the one which Ali had captured.

Rufine's face turned perfectly livid, beads of perspiration started on her brow, and, casting at Minton one terrified glance, she staggered backwards to the wall and leaned against it for support.

"Poison! George!" she gasped. "Where got you that bottle?"

"Yes, poison," said Harold, pitilessly. "You have been trying to poison George for the last week or two—perhaps longer. Since he was laid up you have been putting cocaine regularly into his medicine, and as, despite your efforts, he seemed to be getting better, you went into his room last night and poured into his mixture as much belladonna as would have given your victim the *coup de grâce*."

"It is a lie!" burst out Rufine, recovering herself by a strong effort. "I have not tried to poison George; and that bottle, it has been stolen out of my dressing-room."

"You admit it is yours, then. Yes, it was taken from your dressing-gown. Ali saw you come into George's room last night, saw you pour something into the medicine bottle, followed you to your room and possessed himself of this. He did quite right. But you had been found out already.

The object of my journey to London yesterday was to get an analysis of the medicine you sophisticated the day before. You may as well admit it. You have nothing to gain and everything to lose by denial."

"I admit nothing and deny everything," said Rufine, defiantly. "It is a vile conspiracy. If George has been poisoned at all, the poisoner is that Indian servant of his, How dare you say that I tried to kill George Brandon, the man next to my husband I most respect?"

"If that is the way you are going to take it there is nothing more to be said," returned Harold, quietly. "It will be my duty to communicate with the police, and the evidence against you is much stronger than you suppose."

"The police! You would surely never——"

"Oh, yes, I would. It is for you to choose. Make a clean breast of it, and the affair shall be kept as quiet as possible. Refuse, and before the day is over you will have to leave that sick child for one of her Majesty's gaols!"

Rufine gave a scornful little laugh.

"You think I am not in earnest," continued Harold, sternly. "Well, I give you five minutes for consideration,"—looking at his watch. "If at the end of that time you still persist in your denial, and refuse to make a clean breast of it, I shall go down to the police-office with Dr. Mostyn and make a communication to the inspector, and in less than an hour you will be in custody."

Minton was playing a bold game. While absolutely certain that Rufine was the poisoner, he also knew that

the evidence against her was singularly weak. There was nothing to show that she had mixed cocaine with George's medicine; the belladonna put into the bottle the night before was not a killing dose for a healthy man, and there was really no proof that she had put it there. Ali had not actually seen her touch the bottle, and his testimony alone would not be sufficient to secure a conviction; hardly sufficient, indeed, to justify a prosecution.

Of all this Rufine was as well aware as himself, and had she been as audacious as she was base, she would have set Minton at defiance, and told him to do his worst; and that in all probability would have been nothing. But her resolution failed her at the critical moment. She doubted whether, when it came to the point, Harold would carry out his threat. But he might, and then—— She thought English criminal law procedure was like the French, and the mere possibility of being interrogated by a magistrate, kept *au secret*, having her past life investigated and every little peccadillo she had ever committed brought in judgment against her, was appalling. That alone would be enough to ruin her, even should the main charge utterly break down. And her child! How could she bear to be separated from him—*le pauvre petit enfant*—when he was so ill? No, not for a single day. Far better purchase immunity at the price of a few admissions which she could colour as she thought fit.

"The five minutes are up," said Harold, and he made as if he meant to leave the room.

"*Mais, mon Dieu!* You said you would keep the affair as quiet as possible. What mean you?"

"That it shall not be known outside the family, except to Mostyn, and he will keep it secret. George must know, of course, but I do not see why Peter should."

"Peter! Oh! you may tell him all you like. He knows already. I mean that he wants money very much, and would like George to die."

"But he surely is not an accomplice! That I cannot believe."

"You can believe what you like. But when George seemed so seriously ill, Peter said to me—in a way I quite understood—that although he should be sorry for his brother to die, it would be a good thing for the family, as he himself had lately lost so much money that he did not think he could leave the children anything whatever; and it was not the first time he had said such a thing."

"Why, what a miserable cad the fellow is! You admit, then, that you have been trying to kill George?"

"Not at all! He began to be ill of himself, and as I feared if he got better he might leave us and marry Miss Pemberton, and not do anything for my little boy as he promised, I gave him something to prevent him from getting better, until—until I should find a means of preventing him from getting married. That is all."

"That is all! It is everything. Not the whole truth, though. I don't believe he did begin to be ill of himself, and if you had been let alone a few days longer, you would have prevented him from getting better very effectually—by putting him to death."

"It is not true. I would have stopped short—I tell you George should not have died."

"How can you say so, when you put belladonna in his medicine only last night?"

"There was not enough to kill."

"Perhaps not enough to kill a strong man. But George is not strong just now, and if he had taken what you tried to give him he would surely have died. But let that pass. How did you come by your knowledge of cocaine, and why did you change it for belladonna?"

"You want to know everything. Well, if I tell you,"—glancing uneasily towards the night-nursery—"will you cure my little George? You are very clever or you wouldn't have found all this out; and you can if you will."

"Poor child! He has done no harm, and it is misfortune enough to have such a mother. I cannot undertake to cure anybody, but I will do my best, and I daresay we shall be able to pull him through—Mostyn and I. But let me have all the truth. It is absurd to say that you did not mean to kill George."

"It's a thing understood then. You will do your best for my little boy and keep your word about—about telling nobody else?"

"Of course; that is what I mean."

"Word of honour?"

"Word of honour!"

"Well I give you my word of honour," said Rufine, faintly, "that at first I had no other idea than to stop George from marrying Miss Pemberton, and keep him with us. I have seen them together in the forest."

"What! George and Lucy? I think you are mistaken."

"No, I am not. I saw George with a lady, and I am

sure it was Miss Pemberton. I heard, too, he was going to leave us, so I put dried coca leaves in his tea, and he became ill, as I expected. Then Dr. Mostyn came and ordered him to have no more tea, and he became better. But I had already been very sorry, and said to myself that I would no more give him anything ; nor should I have done if my husband had not told me what I had for some time feared—that his affairs did not march well—that failing what George might leave them there would be nothing for the children, nothing for my poor little boy, and if Peter died we should be in poverty.”

“So you put cocaine in his medicine with the idea of slowly poisoning him.”

“It nearly broke my heart,” said Rufine, with a sob, “but it was a regrettable necessity. Oh, yes ! I was very wrong I would not have done it for my own sake, nor for Peter’s. But my child—I could not bear the idea of his being poor. I have been poor myself, and I know how terrible it is.”

“Don’t add hypocrisy to your other faults, Rufine,” answered Harold, sternly. “Tell me what I asked you just now—how you came to use cocaine, and why last night you used belladonna.”

“It is very soon told. My father was a physician—what you would call here a general practitioner—but once he had been a traveller. In his youth he passed several years in Peru, and there he learned something of coca, and being a *savant*, he tried with it many experiments : made the tincture, became acquainted with its properties, and used it often in his practice, though nobody knew but himself and me, who used to help him and compound his medicines. Oh, if my

poor father had not been too fond of absinthe, things would have been very different. You would never have known me."

"I wish we never had. So all this trouble comes of drink, then? What a curse it is! But you have not told me why you used belladonna."

"Because I had no more cocaine. Poor George! I am glad he will live. You have rescued me from myself, as well as saved his life. Perhaps he may do something for his nephew after all. What shall I give my poor little boy? Hark! he is calling me. I must go to him."

Minton went with her into the night-nursery, gave such directions as he thought needful, wrote out a prescription, and said he would look in again before he went away.

"And you will come again to-morrow?"

"Yes, I will come again to-morrow."

"I shall stay here altogether. That Georgy has scarlet fever will be a good reason for my not receiving anybody or going out. You understand. I cannot see even Mary. Say what you will to George, only don't make it worse for me than you can help."

Here she quite broke down, and her voice was drowned in sobs and tears, but Harold was too indignant either to feel pity or offer consolation.

"It is all on account of the child," he thought. "Her only regret is that she has failed, and I don't believe she cares a button-top what George thinks."

But in this opinion he was somewhat mistaken. If her brother-in-law had died, she would probably have been very sorry—for a time. She had attempted his life not because

she disliked him, but because she saw no other way of "securing her son's future," as she put it to herself. Had George settled twenty thousand pounds on the child, she would neither have adulterated his tea nor doctored his medicine ; and the fact that he would know all, that she had lost his friendship and forfeited his esteem, galled her hardly less than the mortification of exposure and the sense of defeat.

When Mary arrived, Harold told her what had happened, and suggested that they should get George out of the house at once, and persuade him not to return.

"Scarlet fever is a nasty sort of thing," he said. "If he were to take it I should not like to answer for the consequences. He talks of going to town. I think he might safely drive as far and stay there all night. At any rate, it would be safer than staying here."

"He won't stay here and he won't go to town—at least, not to-day," answered Mary, quietly.

"Where will he go, then?"

"Wait till I have had a word with him and you will see. But where is the carriage? Are you going to ask for Peter's?"

"No ; I shall send for one of Letz's,"

An hour later, George, supported on one side by Minton, and on the other by Ali, walked slowly and painfully downstairs and was helped into the carriage, which had been provided with every requisite for an invalid's comfort.

"Where are you going to take me?" he asked his sister. "If I thought I could stand it I should like to go to town. I expected a letter this morning."

Mary whispered something in his ear.

"Through the forest to Wild Roses?" said George, half-rising from his seat, and his voice was almost as firm and clear as in the old days when it had wrung above the rattle of musketry and the clash of steel.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### GEORGE MEANS MARRIAGE.

"EVELYN at Wild Roses? When did she come?" asked George, as he settled himself in his cushions.

"This morning, and in a very pitiable state of mind, poor girl. If she ever succeeds in making you half as wretched as she looked, you will have a nice time of it."

"She had not heard, then?"

"She had heard from Lucy Pemberton how ill you were, but she only got her letter last night, and came over first thing this morning. She has been away somewhere."

"That accounts for my not hearing from her. But does she know about Conroy?"

"She knew from you that he was ill, but she had not heard of his death. I told her, though—by way of cheering her up."

"Poor Evelyn! How did she take it?"

"She said she was thankful for her release, yet very sorry that Conroy had come to so sad an end. But concern for you seemed to be her predominant feeling. She could hardly talk about anything else the short time I was with her."

"Did you tell her you knew?"

"Yes, I told her I knew of your attachment. I thought it better. And even if you had not told me, I should have discovered it from her manner. Lucy knows too—nobody else, though, yet. But if I were you, George, I would not try to keep it a secret any longer—now the impediment is removed—and if you mean marriage——"

"If I mean marriage! What will you say next?"

"That means you do mean it. But don't imagine that marriage is Heaven. It is one of those things that are a good deal pleasanter in anticipation than in reality. Well, as you will not listen to sense, my advice is that you get married as soon as possible. There's no reason on earth for you to wait, and many why you should not."

"I am sure I shall only be too glad. But that depends on Evelyn. What will she say?"

"Oh, she will only be too glad, likewise, when she knows, everything. You want somebody to take care of you, George."

"Rather the other way about, is it not? I want somebody to take care of."

"Not at all. There are very few men who can take care of themselves, let alone taking care of others. You know how narrowly you have escaped falling a victim——"

"What do you mean, Mary?"

"I cannot tell you just now."

"But I insist on you telling me just now. What is it?"

"It is no use. I shan't say another word until Harold says I may. Your nervous system is very much shattered, he says."

"Why did you pique my curiosity, then?"

"I suppose because I am a woman. I know no other reason. Another thing; you must not return to Peter's. The boy has got scarlet fever, and if you should take it in your present weak state you would be sure to die, Harold says."

"Poor little chap! I am very sorry. And his mother—he is the apple of her eye. She will be nearly heart-broken."

"Yes, I believe she is very much put about."

"If I am not to go back, where must I stay?"

"At Wild Roses, of course. The Pembertons are expecting you, and your rooms are ready. I saw to that."

"What a splendid general officer you would make, Mary! You forget nothing and manage everybody."

Soon afterwards they reached Wild Roses. The sound of wheels brought Mrs. Pemberton and her daughter to the garden gate. Close behind them came Evelyn. Her eyes brightened as they met her lover's, but when she saw how weak he was, and how much he had suffered, her grave face became all tenderness and pity.

George had some difficulty in getting out of the carriage, but once on *terra firma*, he put his best foot foremost, and with the help of Ali and a thick stick, did quite as well as could be expected under the circumstances.

"Come into the dining-room," said Mrs. Pemberton, "and I will get you something to eat. You look as if you wanted it. I have a nice sweetbread. We can have it ready in half-an-hour. I will cook it myself. Can you wait half-an-hour?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Pemberton, you are very kind. Oh,

yes, I can wait half-an-hour easily; I don't feel very hungry."

"You must eat whether you feel hungry or not;" and with that she hurried off to the kitchen. The next moment Lucy remembered that she had something to do in the garden, and then Mary, with a look at her brother, as much as to say "Mind what I told you," followed in her wake.

"Evelyn!" said George, and he made as if he would rise from his chair.

"Don't!" she said, softly. "You are too weak. I must come to you;" and she came to him and took his hand and kissed him, and then, kneeling by his side, reverently bent her head.

"You were praying, Evelyn?" he asked, after a moment's silence.

"Yes. I was thanking God for having spared you to me."

"And for having relieved you from that hideous marriage?"

"I am glad to be released, George, but I dare not say—it would be too great presumption—that in order that I may marry the man I love, God has caused a fellow-creature to die. It is a mysterious dispensation. That is all that I can say."

"You are right, Evelyn. I have thought the same. But you are not sorry——"

"No. I cannot say that I feel more sorrow for Wilton Conroy than I feel for any other man who wastes his life and comes to so melancholy an end.

"Yes, it does seem a pity when a fellow goes so utterly to

the bad. While Conroy lived, I hated him, and if we had met I think it would have gone ill with one of us.

Don't look so horrified, darling. You have no idea how desperate I got when hope began to fail."

"It is not for me to blame you, dear. When I heard—when your sister told me this morning that Conroy was dead, my first feeling was one of intense joy; and between hating a man and being glad he is dead, what is the difference? I knew it was wrong, and I was very sorry afterwards, but we cannot always control our impulses."

"We cannot help being human, you mean; and as far as Conroy is concerned, he was really much more to be pitied in his life than his death. It is surely better to die than to live on in slavery. However, there is no use talking about that now. It is all past and gone, and our troubles, I hope, are over. There is no reason why we should wait. Won't you take compassion on my loneliness, and say when——? You know what."

"But would it not be more fitting to wait a while?"

"I don't know what for. You have not borne Conroy's name. He has done nothing whatever to deserve your respect. The only tie between you was a mock marriage. He was a heartless scoundrel, and I daresay remained so to the last hour of his life; and now he is dead. No, Evelyn, I don't see why we should wait any longer than is needful to obtain official confirmation of Conroy's decease and get the licence. It is for you to decide. But as you seem to have a doubt, shall we leave it to my sister? And I will write to Colonel Somers and ask what he thinks."

"Yes, dear, I shall be quite willing to abide by their

decision. I don't think it would be wrong"—emphasis on the wrong—"if we were to be married next week or tomorrow ; but we must have some regard for *les convenances*, you know."

George said something about bothering *les convenances*, yet he was quite content with the turn things were taking. He knew what Mary thought, and he had little doubt that Colonel Somers' opinion would be in harmony with his own wishes.

Later on in the day he put the question to his sister in the presence of her husband and Evelyn. Mary's answer was prompt and to the point.

"Marriage is generally another name for misery," she said, "and, as a rule, I advise anybody I care for to keep out of it ; but there are exceptions, and this is one of them. As I told my brother this morning, he wants taking care of. He has been a distinguished soldier and a successful merchant, and knows how to manage men, but he is no more fit to cope with a wicked, designing woman, than I should have been to cope with that terrible *sorwar* from which he took his gold chain. George has had a narrow escape of being murdered, Evelyn, and absolutely knew nothing about it."

"Don't talk nonsense, Mary," interrupted George, whom his sister's uncomplimentary frankness rather ruffled, "what do you mean?"

"I was never more serious in my life. Wait until I have finished. Harold says that now you have left Fairmead there is no need for further reticence."

And then she told all that had come to pass in the last

few days, ending with Rufine's confession to her husband a few hours previously.

The account was too circumstantial to be questioned ; it was, moreover, confirmed by Harold, who produced Meirstein's written report, the second bottle of sophisticated medicine, and the bottle of belladonna taken by Ali from Rufine's dressing-room.

As the story went on, and the ugly facts came out one by one, George's face darkened more and more, his eyes blazed with anger, and, forgetting his weakness, he tried to rise from his chair.

"And this is the woman for whom I did so much," he exclaimed, "and for whom I would have gladly done more ! And I believe Peter is quite as bad. Depend on it he knew all the time, and was egging her on. He always was a cad, and Rufine's excuses are all lies. It was pure covetousness and greed. By Heaven ! if Peter were not my mother's son I would prosecute them both. Henceforth they are dead to me—they and theirs. I will neither see nor speak to any of the accursed brood again."

"Don't say that, darling," said Evelyn, gently, albeit her face was pale with horror. "The poor children are at least guiltless, and people who do such things are, after all, more to be pitied than blamed. If you only knew Rufine's antecedents and the influences that have moulded her character, you would be more charitable. Her devotion to her child shows that she is not wholly bad ; and both she and Peter have been brought up to think that money and social position are the two things needful, and that of all misfortunes poverty is the greatest."

"You are too good, Evelyn. But whatever I may do in the end, I have not come to that yet. I cannot forgive Peter and Rufine. I have eaten their salt; they are my kin. I treated Rufine as if she was verily my sister, and yet she could hover about me, smiling—asking if I wanted this or that—offering me food and fine words—giving me medicine—regretting my illness, and hoping I would soon be better—and yet all the while she was trying to poison me like a rat! An open foe I can respect and forgive, but a hypocritical murderer I utterly detest and would never spare. It is not a very exalted sentiment, perhaps, but at any rate it is an honest one."

"I am quite of your opinion, George," said Mary, "but you must not include Ned in your malediction. He has been very good, and but for his promptitude in fetching me it would have gone very hard with you. It is chiefly to him Ali that you owe your life."

"You are right. I was too hasty, and I should have been very sorry if Ned had acted otherwise. I liked the lad from the first, and he will find that I am not ungrateful; and you may be sure I shall take care of Ali. As for you and Harold, I am sure I do not know what I can do."

"You have done more than enough already, dear boy—and, don't fear, you have not finished yet by a long way. If I want anything, I shall not allow any false modesty to prevent me from asking for it. What is the good of having a rich brother unless you make use of him, I should like to know. But the main point is still undecided. I want to get you off my hands; one man is quite as much as I can take care of—rather more in fact; two women could

not take care of some men,"—glancing at Harold. "This is the state of the case, Evelyn: George is in a weak condition, and it will be some time before he can recover from the effects of the terrible stuff that wretched Rufine has been giving him. He must go away somewhere, Harold says—to the seaside, or still better, to the Highlands. But it is quite impossible for him to go alone, and having a husband of my own to attend to, I cannot go with him. Will you? And he is dying to be made miserable, poor fellow."

"I would rather be miserable with her than happy with any other woman," said George, "while as for etiquette—without Evelyn, I shall certainly go neither to Scotland nor anywhere else."

"As you will, dear George," murmured Evelyn, putting her hand in his. "You have suffered so much that I cannot say you nay, and when it is a question of your health I count etiquette as nothing."

"You speak like a wise woman," said Mary. "I think you might have done worse, George. She leaves you to name the day. When shall it be?"

"As soon as we can get a special licence; and as I am not exactly in a condition to show up at church, we will be married at Wild Roses. That can be managed, I suppose?"

"Money and fuss being no object, I believe it can," answered Mary. "Harold shall go to town to-morrow, and obtain the necessary information, and then you will be able to fix the day. Thank goodness, that is off my mind."

On the morrow George had two visitors—Colonel Somers and Ned Brandon. The former, as George had expected.

quite approved of his betrothal to Evelyn, and thought, "considering the circumstances," the sooner they were "turned off" the better.

"That scoundrel's death and your engagement to Evelyn are the best news I have heard for many a day," he said, emphatically. "I am glad now that I did not tell you she was married. You might not have fallen in love with her if I had. Poor girl! It is a happy release for her, and she will make you a good wife. You have lost nothing by waiting, old man. What a blessing that fellow died so opportunely! It's about the only good thing he ever did, and if he had not been the utter cad he was, he would have done it long since. However, all's well that ends well."

Ned brought news.

"It is a good thing you did not lend my father that money," he said, after he had heard about his uncle's approaching marriage, and congratulated him thereupon.

"Why?"

"He could not have paid you back. Loot has been playing some hanky-panky tricks on the Stock Exchange and bolted with a lot of the firm's money. It has been kept very quiet. I only knew yesterday. I don't think it will be a regular smash up, but we shall have to retrench. The *pater* will not be able to keep up The Cottage, and no more money can be found for the Manchester people. We are trying to get back what we have paid."

"What will you do, then?"

"Haven't the most remote idea. You could not find a fellow a place at Bombay, I suppose?"

"Just what I was going to propose. As I mean for the future to divide my time between England and Bombay, we shall want another European in the house out there, and if you like you may enter as junior partner. It will make you a good screw and something more."

"Thank you with all my heart, Uncle George. I should like to go out to India above all things. It is awfully good of you—after what has happened, too."

"Say nothing about that, dear boy. We are near akin and good friends, and I am sure shall remain so. As for your father and that woman, I have done with them. By-gones shall be by-gones, but I will never enter their house or speak to them again."

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## CHAPTER XXXIV

### AFTER THE HONEYMOON.

A FEW days later, George and Evelyn were married with a more than Quakerlike simplicity, which was quite as much in harmony with their own wishes as suited to the circumstances in which they were placed.

After the ceremony they went to Scotland, and spent there a long honeymoon, for the most part at a shooting-lodge on the banks of a Highland loch, which George hired for the season, and where the pure air, the sweet companionship of his wife and her tender care, fully restored his health.

As they were returning south, Evelyn, in a sentimental mood, proposed that they should spend a day or two at the place where they first met.

"We did not meet for the first time at Whiteshingles," said George. "It was at Delhi."

"That does not count," answered Evelyn. "I did not know you then, and I am sure you did not know me."

"All right. Let us call at Whiteshingles, by all means. It is not far out of our way, and we are in no hurry."

So they called and put up at Bagot's, and the season being over and the house nearly empty, they were received with distinguished consideration; the more especially as, travelling with two servants—Ali, and a maid whom Evelyn had engaged in Scotland—they were looked upon as very great people indeed.

"Very glad to see you again, sir, and your lady," said the old butler. "I wish you the compliments of the season, sir—I beg your pardon, I mean much happiness. You can have the Nelson again, and the blue bedroom on the first floor, and the dressing-room adjoining—the best in the house. You will find Whiteshingles very quiet; no Oldham rough-heads, nor blethering Crusaders, nor any of that riff-raff. Nature, sir; nothing but nature. And the sea is very fine; the wind is rising now, and I should not wonder if we had it rough before morning."

The sea was fine. As far as the eye could reach, huge, white-crested waves were racing before a stiff nor'-wester, and great breakers dashing like devouring monsters against the hulking that protected the beach, while every now and again, one, bigger than the rest, would o'erleap the obstacle and fall in a spray over the house-tops.

As long as daylight lasted, George and Evelyn sat at their bay window, watching the fascinating yet fearful sight, and

even after nightfall they could see the black mass of angry water seething below them, and seeming as if it had only to come a few yards nearer to overwhelm the house and drag every living thing it contained into its awful depths.

"Enough!" said Evelyn, at length, turning away with a shudder. "Let us have the blinds drawn, and shut out that terrible night. It makes me afraid."

"Why, my darling? We are quite safe here, the sea cannot touch us."

"I know, and we are just entirely in God's hands now as if the sun were as bright and the sea as calm as on that beautiful Sunday when we first met down there on the beach. No, it is not that—not physical fear, much less fear for myself. Rather a foreboding of evil. If you were away from me just now, dearest, I should think some harm had befallen you."

"You are nervous, that is what it is," said George, putting his arm round her. "The journey has been too much for you, and the outlook, though grand, is certainly not exhilarating. Come to this chair by the fireside, and I will ring for tea. It will do you good, and you must go early to bed."

Evelyn allowed herself to be comforted, and tried to be cheerful, and for a while her fears were stilled; yet she could not entirely shake off the sense of dread which the sight of the sea had provoked, for though no longer seen, its melancholy booming and the wild music of the wind, as it swept over the waves, were ever in her ears.

"I am very poor company for you to-night," she said, after a while. "I think I will take your advice and go to

bed. Do you know, dear, I almost wish we had not come here?"

"I shall wish so too if it depresses your spirits in this way; and unless you recover them to-morrow we will be off."

In the morning, George, according to his usual habit, was up betimes, and went on the beach to see how the weather looked. The gale had somewhat abated, yet the sea was still tremendously rough and the wind high, and albeit day had dawned, no sun was visible in the stormy sky. The place seemed to be deserted, the only creatures out besides himself being a solitary group of boatmen who had gathered under the lee of a rock.

They appeared excited, and were looking and pointing seaward.

George looked in the same direction, and could just see, about a mile away in the offing, a three-masted ship, close-hauled on the starboard tack, and, as it seemed to him, labouring heavily and making very little headway.

"She is a good deal too close in to be safe," said one of the boatmen, "and if she doesn't mind she will miss clearing the Horse Bank."

"She'll never clear it while she's a ship," said another. "She's not above two cables' length off it now, and both and tide's against her."

Then followed a silence of several minutes, all watching intently.

"There, didn't I tell you?" shouted the man who had last spoken.

"By G——! she has struck," cried one of his comrades.

George's vision was not as keen as that of the boatmen,

yet he could make out that the ship, which for the last minute or two had hardly seemed to move at all, had now come to a dead stop; then a big sea struck her on the port bow and swept her decks from stem to stern. She heeled over on one side, and her masts went by the board. All this in a few minutes.

"That's a good job," exclaimed an old boatman. "She's right now, them masts is gone, and may hold together, maybe, till the lifeboat gets to her. Run and tell Longstaff, one of you young 'uns."

"Salthouse is off awready."

A little later the sound of a bell, which rose like a tocsin above the hubbub of the storm, told that Salthouse had done his errand. It called the crew of the lifeboat to their posts.

"The ship's done for," said the old boatman, "but the ship's company will be got safe off, every man Jack of 'em, unless some was swept overboard by that last sea. The wind's changed a point, too, and that is all in their favour. They've only to bide quite till th' lifeboat gets to 'em. When I rowed stroke we rescued a ship's company in a good deal worse weather than this. That is welly twenty years since, and we got a medal for it. By G——! what are they doing? What are they doing, Bill? Your eyes is better than mine—surely not lowering a boat."

"They're doing nowt else, the fools."

"They are all dead men, then—them as goes in her. Nowt but a well-manned lifeboat, steered by somebody as knows every yard of the coast, could live in that sea and reach land."

"Can nothing be done to warn them and let them know that help is at hand?" asked George, anxiously, though rather foolishly. "It is hard to see fellow creatures perish before our eyes without making an effort to save them."

"That's true, but what can you do? You cannot telegraph to 'em, nor yet send 'em a letter, and I don't think any of us is likely to swim out to 'em, even if a chap could get there afore they are off."

"They are off," said another, "but as far as I can make out there's only four or five in th' boat."

"Then they're not aw fools," growled the old man. "If t'others will have a bit o' patience, there'll be no more drowned than them four or five."

The waves ran so high and the boat disappeared so often in the trough of the sea, that it seemed as if every moment would be her last, but she was well rowed and skilfully steered, and drew rapidly landward.

"She's making for the cove," shouted one of the spectators, "let's run down wi' ropes; if th' boat gets swamped some o' th' crew may be cast ashore."

"More like their dead bodies," muttered the old boatman.

The cove was a break in the cliffs, empty at low tide, but now filled with a mass of seething water, which dashed itself furiously against the sides, and leaped and foamed up a funnel-shaped gap, down which ran a footpath to the sands.

It was to this spot that George and the boatmen betook themselves.

The boat, well managed to the last, succeeded in reaching the mouth of the cove, and was greeted by the bystanders, now greatly increased in numbers, with a loud cheer.

"It's all very fine, but wait a bit. They're not out o' th' water yet," said the boatman, who played the part of Cassandra. "Stand by to haul her out of the surf before the undertow takes her back."

The words were hardly out of the old fellow's mouth when the boat, struck on her quarter by a huge wave, turned completely over, and the next moment her crew were struggling in the surf.

Two of the five went under at once.

"Fasten this rope round me, one of you, and I'll see if I cannot save at least one of them," shouted George, throwing off his coat.

"You cannot swim against that tide," remonstrated one of the men.

"I will do my best. Fasten the rope, I tell you, and if I throw up my right arm or go under, haul in!"

George dashed into the water.

Three times he was driven back, but the fourth, taking advantage of a momentary lull, he succeeded in swimming a few fathoms out; but nothing was to be seen; the struggling forms and despairing faces which he had seen only a minute ago were no longer visible.

"All gone!" he thought, and he was about to give the signal, when something struck against his legs. He dived and grasped it firmly in his arms; the next moment he felt himself being drawn back, and after a short but severe buffeting, George and his burden were brought safely to land. Whether the body, which appeared to be that of a sailor, was alive or dead, it was impossible to say, for it had been terribly knocked about and was quite unconscious.

"What shall we do with him?" asked somebody.

"Take him to Bagot's and send for a doctor."

"Bagot's! He does not seem to be owt more than a common sailor."

"All the more reason he should be well taken care of. Common sailors have hard lives at the best. Lift him up. Steady! You shall be well paid. He is at my charge, and shall be treated as my guest."

A doctor was at the hotel as soon as the rescued man, and after an hour's strenuous exertion succeeded in restoring his patient to consciousness.

The man would live, he told George, but he was much bruised, and would not be able to go about for two or three days. His four comrades in the boat were lost, but all who remained on the wreck were saved by the lifeboat.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

### AFTER THE WRECK.

It was now no longer a question with the Brandons of leaving Whiteshingles forthwith. The wreck seemed to have dissipated Evelyn's forebodings, and given a new colour to her thoughts. She was deeply gratified by the part which had been played by her husband; and the praises of his intrepidity, which everybody was sounding, were very pleasing to her.

"Dear George!" she said, putting her arms round his neck and looking at him with beaming eyes. "Dear, dear George! Heaven is very good to us. If I could have asked for anything more it would have been this: that

before our honeymoon was well over you should save a human life. The risk was terrible—it makes me shudder to think of it—but the reward is great.”

“To be so thanked, I would risk ten times as much every day,” said George, returning her caress. “And the risk was nothing to speak of, after all. I was fastened to a rope, you know. Lucky the poor fellow knocked against me, wasn’t it?”

“Something more than lucky, darling,” returned Evelyn, gravely. “Say rather, Providential.”

“Providential, then. I think ‘lucky’ expresses my meaning better, though. Wouldn’t it have been equally the doing of Providence if he had been drowned? When shall we continue the journey south?”

“That is for you to decide. I am in no hurry.”

“Well, I should like to stay until this sailor fellow is well enough to go away. That will be Friday, the doctor thinks. I want to do something for him—the sailor, I mean, not the doctor.”

“I should like to see your sailor. Do you know his name?”

“Isaac Roper. You can see him, of course, whenever you like. But you had perhaps better wait a day or two. He needs rest, the doctor says—and he takes it—sleeps nearly all his time. Besides, he is not presentable. He came ashore almost as naked as he came into the world. I have ordered him another rig out. Suppose you see him on Friday—he will be up and clothed then—and we will leave the day after?”

“As you like, dear George. Yes, let it be so. The

weather seems to be taking up, and we may spend two or three days here very agreeably."

In the meantime, George had several talks with Isaac Roper, who seemed sincerely and almost abjectly grateful for his rescuer's kindness. The ship he had belonged to, the "Araminta," hailed from Liverpool and was bound for New York. To complete her cargo she had to call at Belfast, and was on her way thither when she was driven out of her course and wrecked on the Horse Bank.

"Bad seamanship and drunkenness were the cause," said Roper. "Most of the crew were drunk when they came on board at Liverpool, and the captain was three sheets in the wind when we struck. It was him that ordered the boat to be lowered."

"A most foolish proceeding. A pity he was not in her himself."

"He was, and got drowned for his stupidity ; and worse, d——n him. He caused the loss of those three fellows' lives, and I had a narrow squeak for mine."

Despite Roper's roughness and bad grammar, it seemed to George that his language and manners were not those of a common sailor ; but the man's antecedents were no business of his, and when the doctor pronounced him convalescent, George gave him a new kit to replace the one he had lost, and five pounds to help him on his way.

The sailor was deeply moved, but George put a rather peremptory stop to his expressions of gratitude by asking him to step into the Nelson.

"My wife would like to see you before you leave," he said. "When would you like to start?"

"To-night, with your permission, kind sir. The sooner I get back to Liverpool the better. The owners of the "Araminta" will, maybe, find me a berth on one of their other ships."

"This is the seaman who was so badly hurt and nearly drowned — Isaac Roper," said George, as he led the way into the sitting-room.

On this, Evelyn, who had been sitting at the bay window watching the sun as he sank majestically into the purple sea, rose from her chair and came towards them.

"I am very glad——" she began.

Then she stopped short, trembling like a leaf, turned as white as a sheet, and she and the sailor—who was in the act of making a bow and a scrape—stared at each other as if both had seen a ghost.

"Isaac Roper! Isaac Roper!" cried Evelyn. "No! It is——Wilton Conroy!"

"Evelyn Waters! My——"

"No! no! no! I am not your wife, Wilton Conroy!" exclaimed Evelyn, springing forward as if she would strike him. "I am not your wife; I am this gentleman's — I am George Brandon's wife, and will be his till death—death——"

Here she stopped short again, and fell fainting into George's arms. He carried her to the door and called for Ali.

Ali came.

"Watch this man," he said, "and for your life, do not let him go until I return."

Then he bore Evelyn to her room. George was not the

sort of man who fools because a woman faints. He laid her on the bed, applied restoratives, and in a few minutes she came to herself.

"You are still with me ! Oh, thank Heaven !" she sobbed. "Don't, don't leave me."

"Only for a short time. But are you sure you are not mistaken ? Is that man really Wilton Conroy ?"

"Oh, George, I am not mistaken. I am only too sure. And did you not see that he recognised me ?"

"If I had known that, he might have perished a thousand times before I would have raised a finger to rescue him. I will have a few words with him and then come back to you."

"But, George, dear," she exclaimed, fearfully, taking both his hands in hers, "George, dear, you are not going to—to——"

"What ?"

"Kill him."

"He deserves it."

"But you won't. For my sake, for Christ's sake ! He is bad, very bad. But you won't imperil your soul ; you won't stain your hands—— Leave him to God—— Promise ! Promise ! I won't let you go——" And she clung passionately to him, her eyes flowing with tears, her voice broken with sobs.

George lovingly and gently loosed her hands. "Don't fear !" he said. "I never yet killed a fellow creature except in fair fight, and you may be sure I shall do nothing of which a man who has worn the Queen's uniform need be ashamed. You must let me go now. I shall be back presently."

When George returned to the Nelson, he saw at a glance that Conroy had been trying to get away. The Indian had his knife drawn, and the other was standing opposite to him and near the door, in an attitude half-threatening, half-imploing.

"Go outside, Ali, and wait till I call," said his master.

"And now, Mr. Conroy, for that appears to be your right name," he said, addressing the *soi-disant* seaman, "I want a little explanation. You were sentenced some five years ago to ten years' penal servitude for a series of felonies. A little more than three months since you were reported to have died at Portland, and now you turn up as Isaac Roper and call yourself a sailor. What does it all mean? No hesitating, please; make a clean breast of it at once, or I will send for the police and give you in charge as an escaped convict. What does it mean, I say?"

"You need not threaten," answered Conroy, sullenly. "I will tell you without. But you have a right to know. After my trial and conviction, I was sent with a lot more, first to Newgate, then to Millbank, lastly to Dartmoor. Just before we were turned over to the warders who conveyed us to Dartmoor, I contrived to change identities with a fellow prisoner. It is a thing not easily done, but it is done. The man I exchanged with was called Isaac Roper, a professional thief, who was in for five years, and spent more time in gaol than out of it, and when he got out did not expect to be more than a few weeks at liberty. Well, for a consideration—I got something done for him through a friend—he agreed to take my name and lend me his. The chances were, of course, very much against the thing going

through, but it did, for, as it happened, we were not very unlike. So at Dartmoor I became Isaac Roper—in for five years, he, Wilton Conroy—in for ten. He died a short time since—about the same time that I, having got some good marks, was released on a ticket-of-leave a few months before my time.

“As Isaac Roper had been convicted at Liverpool, I was sent there to be discharged and turned adrift, with a suit of shoddy clothes on my back and a few shillings, which I had earned at Dartmoor, in my pocket.

“What was I to do? I durst not for the life of me make myself known. All my friends but one—and he was in America—thought I was dead. There was not a soul to whom I could appeal without risking recognition. I was bound to get out of the country at all hazards, and then it occurred to me that as I knew a good deal about boating, and used to sail my own yacht, the best thing I could do would be to work my passage out to America as an ordinary seaman. So for my shoddy suit and the greater part of my money, I got a second-hand sailor’s rig-out, and then got a berth on board the ‘Araminta.’ You know the rest.”

“Yes, I know the rest,” replied George, grimly, “and I wish it had been a very different ‘rest.’ I wish I had never come here, and that you had either carried out your intention of going to America, or been drowned the other day in the breakers.”

“I understand,” said Conroy, insolently; “you have married Evelyn——”

“Stop! How dare you speak of my wife as Evelyn? You have forfeited every claim to consideration or respect.

Miss Waters and I married when we heard you were dead, not before."

"Don't let that trouble you, Mr. Brandon. We can easily square that little difficulty. There is nothing I want so much as to get out of the country. Give me a little money to start with on the other side—say a thousand pounds—and you will never see or hear of me again, and nobody shall know I am alive."

"You scoundrel! Why, you are a greater cad than I thought you. Give you a thousand pounds? Is it not enough that I saved your life! Not a thousand farthings. And look here! If you are not gone to-morrow morning, I will tell the police who you are. You have money in your pocket. There is a train to Liverpool to-night."

With that, George turned on his heel and left the room. At the door he found Ali.

"Let him go where he will," he said.

Then he went to poor Evelyn. She was in a state of excitement so intense that he almost feared for her reason. One moment she would twine her arms round his neck, and declare that she would never, never leave him, that nothing but death should part them. Then she would say that she was a wicked woman, that they were living in sin, that she must go—go at once—go where she could hide her shame and where nobody knew that she was married to two men. It was quite impossible to discuss the question on its merits or think what they should do. George watched by her the night through, consoling and comforting her as best he could. An hour or two before dawn she fell asleep, and though unutterably wretched, he was so exhausted by the

emotion he had undergone, that after awhile he slept, too.

When he awoke the sun was shining brightly, yet Evelyn still slept. He looked at his watch. It was past ten o'clock.

George rose and went into his dressing-room—he had lain down with his clothes on. The matutinal tea was there, quite cold. Ali had doubtless brought it at day-break, and his knock had failed to wake him. Then, with mind so pre-occupied that he scarcely knew what he was doing, he slipped into the corridor, and at the same time Bagshaw passed with a tray.

“Oh ! Mr. Brandon, how you frightened me,” exclaimed the butler, letting the tray fall with a crash, and looking terribly scared.

“What the mischief—why should you be frightened?”

“Oh, dear ! You have not heard, then?”

“I have heard nothing—only just got up. What is the matter?”

“Matter? Murder’s the matter ! That sailor you rescued, Isaac Roper, was murdered near the station sometime last night. They found his dead body lying there this morning—throat cut from ear to ear.”

“Roper murdered?” gasped George, reeling against the wall. “Impossible ! You rave, man !”

“No, Mr. Brandon, I don’t rave, I only wish I did. The terrible news is only too true. If you don’t believe me, go and ask the police.”

“I will,” and without another word George put on his hat and went straight to the police-office.

The sharp walk and the fresh air soothed his nerves and restored his presence of mind, and he managed to talk to the inspector on duty without showing more emotion than was natural in the circumstances.

As Bagshaw had said, "the terrible news was only too true." Conroy had been murdered, but by a stab between the shoulders, not by having his throat cut.

"Somebody must have crept after the poor chap in the dark," said the inspector, "as he was on his way to the station, and taken him unawares. The strangest part of the affair is that he does not appear to have been robbed. Anyhow, there was nearly five pounds in his pocket. I suppose the villain that did it heard somebody coming and was too frightened to finish his work. But we are making every effort. I think we have a clue already."

"Of course; and if you find anything out, I shall be glad if you will let me know at once. I thought of going away to-day, but I shall not go till after the inquest. The coroner may possibly like to have my evidence, though I don't think it is likely to throw any light on the affair. When will the inquest be held, do you suppose?"

"Probably on Monday."

"Very well. I will wait until Tuesday."

After a little further conversation with the inspector, George went back to Bagot's. He found Evelyn awake, but looking as wretchedly ill and woebegone as the day before she had looked radiant and happy.

"I was beginning to fear you had left me," she said, with a painfully pathetic smile that went to his heart.

"Why should I leave you?" he asked, sitting down beside her. "Never while I live will I leave you."

"But you must, must not you? Or I must leave you. It is not right. But I cannot think. My head is in a whirl. You must think for us both, darling. But about one thing I am quite clear. We must submit to God's will and do right, whatever it costs."

"I quite agree with you, and it is right for us to remain together. That man is no longer your husband, even in the eye of the law."

"How can that be, George? Am I not married to him, and does not everybody say that the marriage was quite legal?"

"So it was, Evelyn. But the marriage has been dissolved. Conroy is dead!"

"Oh, George, do not trifle with me."

"I am not trifling with you." And then he told her about the murder.

"It seems all a dream, I cannot realise it," she murmured. "What? what? Do you think"—sinking her voice to a whisper—"is it not possible they may suspect—suspect you?"

"It is not possible. I left Conroy in our sitting-room last night at six o'clock, came here to you, and stayed with you until ten o'clock this morning. Besides, who could possibly suspect me of taking the life of the man whom I saved from death only the other day? All the same, I am not hypocrite enough to pretend to regret his death. You said that my saving his life was Providential. Try and think that his death is equally so. At any rate, neither of us is in any way responsible for it."

"You are right, George. What shall we do, then?"

"Stay here until the inquest is over; then go back to Scotland and get married over again. We can do it in such a way that nobody will be the wiser, yet be able to prove the second marriage if the first should ever be called in question."

. . . . .

When Ali heard that his master was returning to Scotland, he said that he should like to return to Bombay.

"Why?" asked George.

"It is so cold," said the Indian, with a shiver, "and the English climate does not agree with me. I think it would be good for my health to go to Bombay for a while. But I will come to the sahib again."

"Perhaps you are right, Ali. The climate here might not agree with you this winter, and it would be a pity for you to be ill. Yet I shall be sorry to part with you. You saved my life, and you have served me faithfully and well—almost too well, some would think. I will pay your passage out, of course, and your wages will be continued just as if you were with me. As for myself, I am not sure that, except in one respect, my visit to England has been quite a success. The climate, as you say, is cold, and life here is hard. I daresay next year will see me back in India."

And then they parted. Ali went away in good spirits, for according to his ideas he had done more than his duty, and he knew that he should soon see his master again.

THE END.

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